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THE COMIC
CREATORS SPEAK
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ESCORTS**

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ONE MMO'S RED-
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— GamePro Magazine

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— GameInformer

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OBLIVION™

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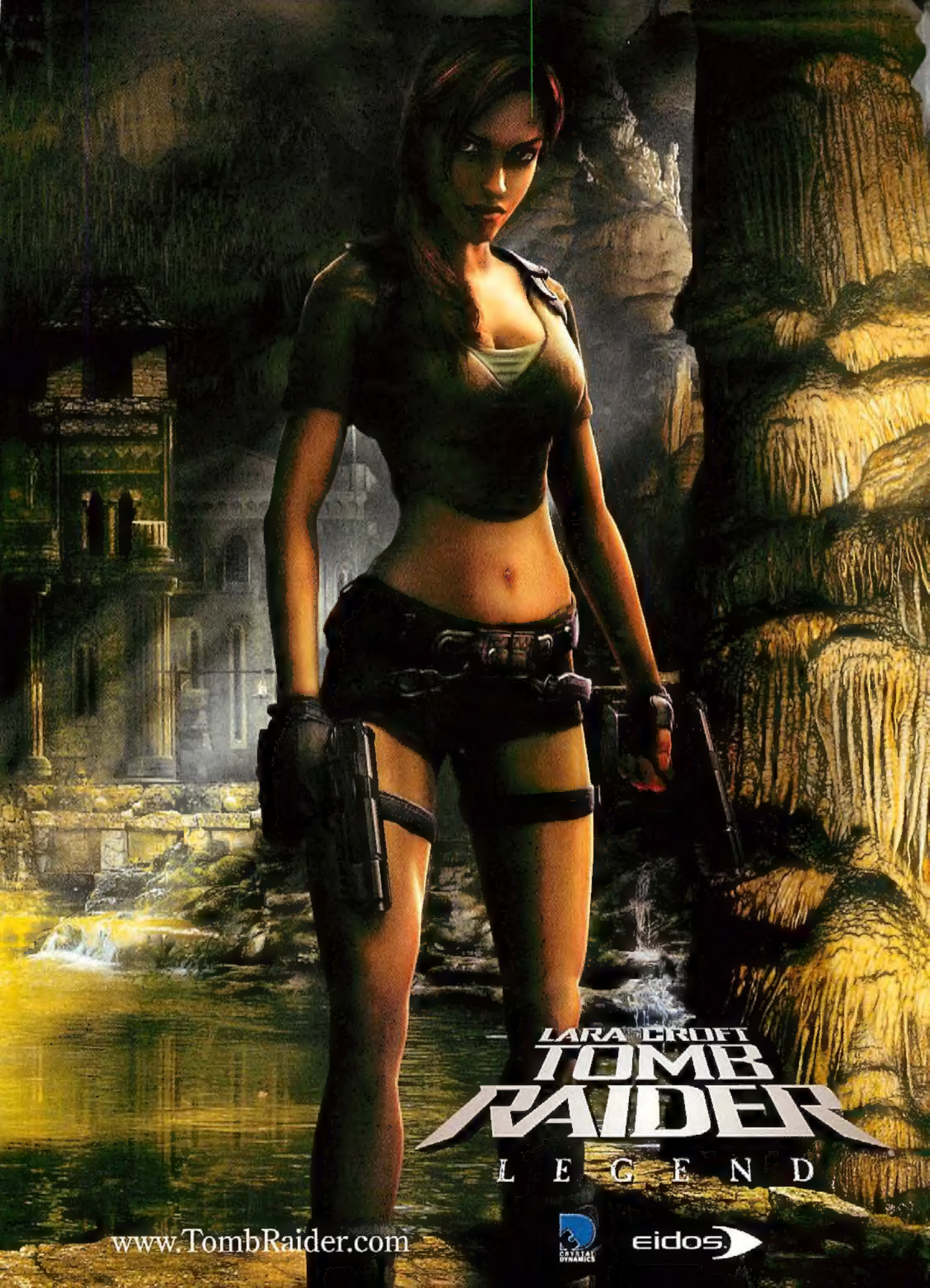
Blood
Language
Suggestive Themes
Violence



PlayStation 2



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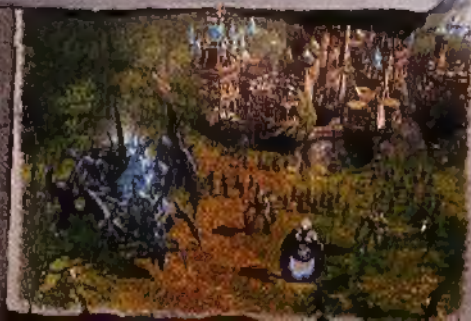
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WORLD EXCLUSIVE

10 Editorial

Old Man Green reminisces about ye olden days, when CGW didn't have scores on its reviews. Kind of like now!

12 Letters

Nothing warms our hearts like your scathing, hate-filled comments. Thanks for writing in again, mom.



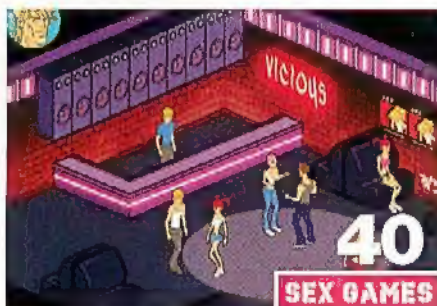
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■ COVER STORY

HELLGATE: LONDON

Every other Friday, Flagship Studios closes its doors, and the *Hellgate: London* development team gets its hands dirty in group play sessions of its upcoming creation. In an unprecedented behind-the-scenes story, CGW sits in at Flagship's offices to see what game development is really like.

16 Radar

This month in Radar, we explore the red-light district of PC gaming in two in-depth minifeatures. Plus, we've got the latest word on 2K Games' *BioShock* and Midway's *Stranglehold*, and a hilarious two-page interview with the talented duo behind fan-favorite webcomic *Penny Arcade*.

79 Viewpoint

Don't panic—your reviews didn't go anywhere. In this month's new and improved (and retitled) Viewpoint section, you can find in-depth critiques of games like *Rainbow Six: Lockdown* and *X3: Reunion*, as well as a couple of new columns focusing on casual gaming and MMORPGs. Finally, Tom vs. Bruce has a new home—and this month, the battle takes them to a galaxy far, far away in *Star Wars Empire at War*.

80 *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*

84 *Bonnie's Bookstore*

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92 *Tom vs. Bruce: Star Wars Empire at War*



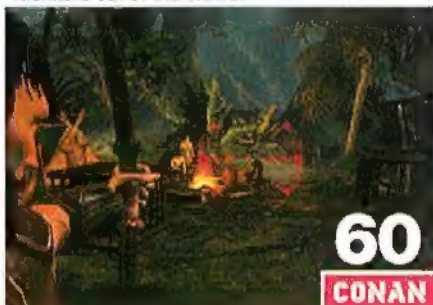
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96 Tech

Behold the glorious new Tech section! In these pages, you get not only reviews and expert advice on the latest technical doohickeys, but all the training you need to pick the best LCD monitors out of the crowd.

102 Scorched Earth

Hello, I must be going. I'll stay a week or two, I'll stay the summer through, but I am telling you...I must be going.



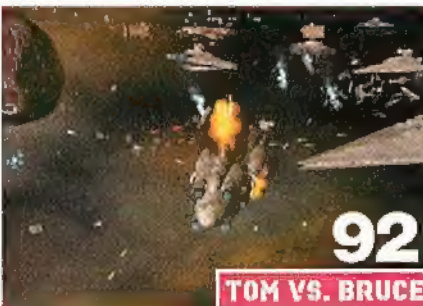
CONAN



RAINBOW SIX



X3: REUNION



TOM VS. BRUCE

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**96
TECH**

**THIS MONTH
ON 1UP.COM**



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WWW.GAMEVIDEOS.COM

The newest member of the 1UP family hosts not only the latest game trailers, but also machinima, speed runs, and all those wacky joke videos that get forwarded around the office.

EDITORIAL 262

NEW REVIEWS: ZERO STARS?

You love scores, you hate scores



I'm old. How old am I? Just look at that illustration to the left—that's one old dude! I'm so old, I remember back when this magazine ran game reviews without any star ratings on them. From our humble beginnings in 1981 until June 1994—that's 13 years, according to my calculator!—this magazine did not attach numeric scores to reviews. And when we finally started to, in July 1994, it incited an immediate firestorm of protest. "You've sold out!" readers cried. "You've dumbed the magazine down!" they sighed. "You've made the text irrelevant!" they whined. Over time, however, the protests died down

(mostly), and the gaming public came to accept scores as a crucial aspect of a game review. Now, a game's GameRankings.com average is often the only thing many gamers (and publishers and developers) even care about.

So it's with much irony that the CGW mailbox now overflows with new protests from readers angry that we *removed* the scores last month. Why we did that may be a little clearer this month, as we reveal more of our ongoing strategy to reposition and redefine our editorial mission here in 2006. Or maybe it will be even less clear. What do I know? In any case, check out our new Viewpoint section, and, as always, give it to us straight at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com.

In other news, this issue marks the end of Robert Coffey's Scorched Earth column, as Robert has gone full-time with his animal torturing project. Coffey-heads need not worry, as Robert's particularly creepy brand of journalism will continue to grace these pages in his new casual gaming column (see page 83). Finally, kudos to Sean Dallaskidd, who drew these awesome staff illustrations, and regularly does tons of great drawings for us but never gets the proper credit. So, thanks. But if I look this old again next month, bub, you're fired!

/JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Now Playing: *Heroes of Might and Magic III*, *Titan Quest* beta
1UP.com Blog: cgwjeff.1UP.com

MEET TEAM CGW

KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR

See all those red folders in my lovely little cartoon hands here? I could probably build a nice little fort out of them every month.

Now Playing: *Need for Speed: Most Wanted*
1UP.com Blog: kristenss.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS)

Kids: Brush your teeth. And floss. And use mouthwash. And don't eat so much friggin' junk food. Just trust me on all this stuff.

Now Playing: *Dental Nightmare*
1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com

LOGAN PARR
LOVABLE CGW MASCOT

I was the disc guy here, but with no CD this month, I've been nominated as CGW's official mascot. Does this mean I get free lunches all month, too?

Now Playing: *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warlight*, *The Godfather*
1UP.com Blog: logans_run.1UP.com

SEAN DALLASKIDD
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

Now Playing: *Prince of Persia*
1UP.com Blog: The_dallaskidd.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES)

Who needs mind-altering drugs when you can just stay up three days straight to write stories? Oh, and where are the stanchions?

Now Playing: *Steam Brigade*, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_gladstone.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (PREVIEWS)

Me, the multiplayer FPS freak gaga for on-your-own *Oblivion*'s fantasy land? Go figure.

Now Playing: *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*
1UP.com Blog: cgwshawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

Thanks to an ear infection, I'm hearing 50 percent less crap from these guys. Yay!

Now Playing: *City of Villains*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_jennings.1UP.com

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ISSUE 262

LETTERS

HIT US WITH
YOUR BEST
SHOT

LETTER OF THE MONTH



CALLING ALL OLD BROADS

Consider me one of your biggest fans! Can you tell me: Are there any others like me "out there"? I can't tell anyone I can blow the brains out of Nazis good as any whippersnapper. I cut my teeth on *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* and even remember where all the treasures are after all these years. Last summer, I built my own gaming machine. Lucky for me, my husband doesn't understand much about computers, so I got away with a lot of technical mumbo jumbo in order to upgrade to the fastest processor and graphics card, and I included two new games in the "upgrade" budget...but I have to hide my games and wait until I'm all alone before cranking up my THX sound that sends my dogs running from the room. I'm 58, a step-grandma, and still listen to the Rolling Stones. My husband thinks "gamer" means 1,001 solitary games. I'd like to know if there are any other old broads out there having as much fun as I am.

"Grandma" Ricci

We're sure there are plenty of other old broads out there who like to game as much as you. Just look at our editor-in-chief!

ALL MOD CONS

In your "101 Free Games" feature [March 2006, Issue #260], the FPS section was almost entirely made up of mods. [Three of them] were stand-alone games, but everything else needed the retail release of a game. Call me a nitpicker, but a mod is not a free game. A mod requires you to have purchased a game in order to use it. Anyone who read the article could not have just downloaded and played the games you listed if they didn't already have the game that the mod was made for. This does not spell out "free game" to me. Mods are free, but they are not free games. Now, Bungie's *Marathon Trilogy* is a free game—download it and play away—but the *Iron Wrath* expansion is useless to any reader

who does not own *Rainbow Six 3*.

Mods are not free games, and [listing them that way] doesn't make the mag "look better" because it gives you an inflated number to brag about. Don't we all have enough inflated numbers that we throw around anyway? Other than that, great job on the article.

Jay T.



Maybe I'm expected to know that to play a mod means that you have to have the game it's based on in order to play it, but it would have been nice for the writer to point that out for *Ultima V: Lazarus* in your "101 Free Games" feature. I downloaded the files just fine, but I didn't find out that I needed to have *Dungeon Siege* installed (which I don't even own) in order to play the game.

Other than this little oversight, the "101 Free Games" article was great! I like reading CGW articles as useful as this one. I played *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* years ago in its original form and thought it was great, even though I never could figure out how to finish it. I stumbled across a newer version a couple of years ago, but I'd lost the link. Glad to see it make the article. I've also played *Codename: Gordon*, which showed up one day on my Steam account. At first, I hated Steam, because you had to wait so long for everything to load before you could play. But now, I appreciate the usefulness of a game that updates itself. Kudos to Valve for putting a freeware game from modder Garry Newman on its system. ["101 Free Games"] mentioned a lot of free games I hadn't heard of, and I'm looking forward to trying some of them out.

John

We debate the inclusion of mods in the "101 Free Games" feature every year, but we ultimately include them not to "inflate the numbers" but to clue readers in to cool ways to extend the lives of games in ways they may not know about. But yeah, we'll label 'em more clearly next time around.

THE ANSWER TO ALL YOUR QUESTIONS

So are the maps in *Ticket to Ride* really backward or were the pictures in the review on page 87 of the March 2006 issue flipped for some reason?

Bryan-Mitchell Young

They were flipped for a reason. The reason: We're stupid.

OH, THE PROFANITY!

What the f***? My 11-year-old son likes to check out your magazine for cool games and screenshots, and he usually grabs the issue before I do. So when I buffed a party member in *WOW*, I guess he thought it was funny to say, "Bless that f***ing nub." When I asked him where that (the f***) came from, he proudly produced page 10 of CGW Issue #260 and showed me the comic there. Jesus f***ing Christ! Jeff Green and the rest of you over there need to get your f***ing heads out of your f***ing a**es and actually edit your f***ing magazine.

Eric Robinson

In my many years of reading your rag, I have never spotted an F-bomb. Your comic on page 10 of Issue #260 tickled me in ways I never thought a comic could. Keep 'em coming.

Alek Nelsen

Wait—we printed an F-bomb? Holy f***ing s***! We f***ing suck!

DARREN VS. DARREN
I was looking casually through my old CGWs and I noticed that in the Gladstone section of the January 2006 issue, Gladstone made the following statement: "Mods can't even make himself a game without bitching about it!" So, Gladstone, SERVES YOU RIGHT! Your criticizing other games has finally come back to bite you in the butt! HA!

—Sean Dean Valentine Gallardo

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT
★★★★★
ZERO STARS



MAIL
BYTES

I don't want to solve the social problems of the day when I am playing in *WOW*; I just want to kill orcs.
—Yandicurlvey

Now that I've seen Kristen with her whip, please consider this humble request to eternally renew my subscription.
—Rob

The *Godfather* mod is the best thing since Jesus started dune-bugging on the moon, granting wishes with his miracle hat.
—The Eldritch



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Feels like a
night out
with friends!*

*Midnight
Bowling*



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- 3** *Send to 82174 and download the game*



**MIDNIGHT
POOL**



POOL

**PLATINUM
SUDOKU**



SUDOKU

**PLATINUM
SOLITAIRE**



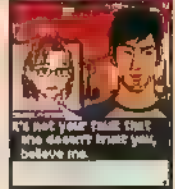
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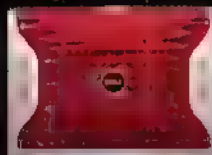
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ISSUE 262

RADAR

NEWS,
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BIOSHOCK

Shock to the system

▼ Out of sync with BioShock's horrors,
Art Deco architecture promises Rapture.



Guild Wars: Factions

Plan your attack in advance with our sneak-peek map.

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John Carmack

The prolific programmer talks up the tech that makes *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* tick.

28

Escort Mission

Inside MMO *Second Life*'s call-girl-driven shadow economy.

34



PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Irrational Games GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: 2007

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

A dark illimitable ocean, without bound, without dimension, where length, breadth, and height, and time and place are lost.

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

IT BEGINS IN FIRE. BUT WRENCHED AND water-blind, you struggle up through the wreckage of your plane. Questions hit your brain like grenades. Where are you? What caused the crash? In the near distance, a lighthouse stabs the sky. A lighthouse in the middle of the ocean? You swim toward the improbable structure, crawling from the water and clambering up its spiral staircase. At the pinnacle, a bathysphere hangs suspended from thick steel cabling.

"Bewildered, but curious, you climb into the deep-diving chamber and—nowhere else to go—trigger your descent into the blank water below. You can see the tail section of your plane sinking slowly in the distance as the light above fades. A video screen warbles to life and a voice speaks: something about a secret utopia, an ocean-bottom city populated by the world's elite. You try to follow, but it's garbled, and as it finishes, you're left in murmuring blackness, except for...a billboard? Emerging outrageously from the inky murk, a smiling, four-color bombshell pitches a brand of cigarettes: Oxford Club ("For Discriminating Tastes, No Compromises!"). Agog, you pass beneath the floodlit poster and emerge above a turquoise metropolis plunging into sunless

depths. Welcome to the Garden of Eden at the end of the world...welcome to *Rapture*.

SON OF SHOCK

At the turn of the century, Boston-based Irrational Games (*Freedom Force*, *SWAT 4*) released a sequel to defunct developer Looking Glass Studios' 1994 "immersive first-person 3D" game, *System Shock*. Interface-nuanced and memorably ambient, *System Shock 2* failed to score in the mass market, but pundits gushed anyway, a few even placing it on "best of all time" lists. Why? Forget gravity guns and bullet-time reflexology; the *Shock* series reflected filmic notions that psychological terror trumps reckless run-and-gunners. Its lesser commercial success remains one of history's mysteries (overly complex interface? Or just undermarketed?), but anyone who's played it understands: *Shock 2* was grab-your-ankles scary, and pulled it off without having to go "boo."

Enter *BioShock* (not the long-hoped-for *System Shock 3*—Electronic Arts owns the rights to the series). *System Shock 2* creative director and Irrational founder Ken Levine says he's been kicking around a "spiritual" sequel to the *Shock* series forever. "The specifics were pretty different originally, but the intentions were always the same," he explains as we sit in a room surrounded by dim pictures of light-riddled underwater buildings. "And by that, I mean engaging the next step of immersive gameplay, to have more choice and expression and to really look at the next big thing with A.I."

Challenging SOE chief creative officer Raph Koster's recent assertion that the single-player game is doomed, Levine thinks it's barely cleared the womb. "We were saying, 'OK, we can make A.I. that does all the traditional A.I. stuff—flanking, audio smarts, communication.' But we didn't know where else to go," says Levine, sitting forward in his chair and smiling. He's about to talk up his favorite subject, emergent gameplay, aka "players coloring outside designer lines."

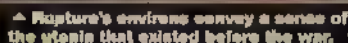
"We started looking at A.I. that had relationships," he says, referring to the system at the technical core of *BioShock*, "A.I. that had a web of motivations, which would result in behavior that would be very understandable to the player, A.I. capable of evoking complex emotional responses." If multiplayer games are chat-a-rific at the expense of thematic complexity, thematically rich (by comparison) single-player games often fall to meet players' >



INTERVIEW
F.A. BYAN
E.D. Sutter
D. 4/12

Tom, let me see if I can be very clear. The new Fontaine is not talking about the dark analysis. Business environment, people and facts. I find might try threatening this one of the board members. I can see now that could be a Tom as you have a few

FORGET BULLET-TIME REFLEXOLOGY—
PSYCHOLOGICAL TERROR TRUMPS
RECKLESS RUN-AND-GUNNERY.



18 • COMPUTER GRAPHICS • 2006



Authors say Rapture's citizens bodies that contain harvested DNA.



NOT YOUR TYPICAL ARSENAL

Pack away the Adam and you'll eventually be able to purchase upgrades at "plasmid" stations. These give you special abilities ranging from *System Shock*-like psionics such as "mind pull" (telekinetics) and psychic weapon buffs, to ecology-shifting abilities that make you look like a gatherer to an aggressor (which then leaves you alone) or protector (which defends you with its magnificent toys). You can even turn aggressors against gatherers—or if you just want to cut to the chase, against protectors themselves—with an ability called Aggressor Infant.

Weapons will have a decidedly organic feel. "The weaponry in Rapture is hand-cobbled together and modular," explains Levine, pointing out that Rapture's postwar society has no real means of industry. While traditional weapons like pistols exist, they're odd amalgams of jury-rigged parts like airplane radiator coils. "The weapons keep getting added to over time," notes Levine. "Using the right weapon for the right job is very important."



GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II

DREAD LORDS

Bridge:

Self-sustaining module supports Level III Artificial Gravity. Includes redundant support system in case of breach.

Sensors:

Sabre Dynamics Mark III Sensor Grid extends range by up to 7 parsecs.

Life Support:

Two (2) Gencon Level II Habitation Rings.
One (1) Advanced Graviton Distributor.

Weapons:

Two (2) Saltheon "Orion" 63 Heavy Particle Beams.
One (1) Northrop Ltd. Mark II Rail Gun.

Propulsion:

Two (2) Northington "Vulcan VI" HyperDrive Reactors.
One (1) Lockstead-Millar Newtonian Fusion Drive.

Defenses:

Duranthium II armor plating.
Two (2) Omega Deflector II Generators.

NAME: TAS Harbinger
CLASS: Hyperion Class Attack Cruiser
LENGTH: 225 Meters
SPAN: 57 Meters
MASS: 2.55 Million Defual Tons

ACCELERATION: E-1g
SPEED: 110 Parsecs / Week
RANGE: 378 Sections
ATTACK RANGE: 87.2 Parsecs
DEFENSE: 270 x 1

RACE: Terran Alliance
CREW COMPLEMENT: 432

DESIGNER: **YOU!**

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MIDWAY

THE CGW INTERVIEW PENNY ARCADE

More than just comic relief BY DARREN GLADSTONE

INTERVIEW

JERRY HOLKINS AND MIKE KRAHULIK HAVE been friends since high school, doing odd jobs, hanging out, playing games, and making comics. However, it's their alter egos (Tycho Brahe and Johnathan "Gabe" Gabriel, respectively) that everyone knows. Tycho and Gabe are the stars of the popular webcomic *Penny Arcade*, have been sued by a greeting card company, started a charity, gotten on Jack Thompson's bad side, and spoken at MIT. And that's just the past couple of years. What's with these two?

Q: Reading the posts and the comic, it's easy to get that you just love playing games and drawing comics. Did you ever—

Jerry "Tycho" Holkins: ...think that it could become a living? It wasn't a remote possibility—totally inconceivable. The term "webcomic" I hadn't really ever heard that term at the time. That was an invention a couple of years later. I think we were just uploading graphics to the Web—it was just another image.

Q: Just two guys goofing off in your spare time?

THROUGH THE YEARS

April 2003: Sued by American Greetings for raucy cartoon about Strawberry Shortcake.

November 2003: Formed gaming-centric charity for children's hospitals, Child's Play.

April 2004: First Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) held in Bellevue, WA.

October 2005: Antigaming zealot Jack Thompson issued an open challenge, offering a donation to charity if someone would create a violent videogame in which players killed game developers. Not surprisingly, several entries surfaced. When Thompson reneged, PA donated \$10,000 in Jack Thompson's name. Harassment ensued.

JH: Literally, we were making the comics when—like, I wasn't getting off work until 10 or 11 at night. And so, we were doing the comics in the middle of the night, playing *Tribes* and whatever else we had at the time, and doing the comics whenever we could fit it in. I was working tech service for a school district. **Mike "Gabe" Krahulik:** And I was selling computers at Circuit City. There were a lot of days when I draw *Penny Arcade* in the computer section at Circuit City, with customers walking up and asking for help, and I just ignored them and drew. I think that both of us, at least in the beginning, drew a lot of inspiration from our day jobs.

Q: So how much of these characters are really you?

JH: At first, we didn't think it'd be that way. There's something that is just sort of universal and resonant about that "two friends on the couch" sort of gaming experience. And we thought that these were external—you know, we thought that the "Tycho" and "Gabe" personas were sort of external to us until a year and a half or so into the project. It turns out that they sort of represent a lot more than just us.

Q: Now you've got all this clout in the gaming industry.

MK: We're a megacorporation now. **JH:** It's like in *Blade Runner*, the big building with the neon thing. **MK:** It's a dark future.

Q: It comes with becoming an opinion-maker in the game industry.

MK: Well, we try not to think about it. That would really screw us up, you know? **JH:** Yeah, I mean, that's the main concern, at least for me. I try not to think too much about *Penny Arcade* as a force in the industry. I try to think about it as our creative outlet, as we have done throughout the entire project. Because the reality is that these personas that we present, that sort of outcast, nerdy persons, those aren't



Want to win a signed copy of *Penny Arcade's* new book? Head to 1UP.com!

an invention for the strip. That's a real thing. And so I think that by and large, the... I don't know where I'm going with that. I totally had a point.

CGW: Yeah, you were right there. [Laughs]

MK: I believe that you did, man. I'm sure it was going to be good.

JH: Well, no, it's just that we... I don't know. [Laughs] I had this... I was rising to a crescendo. And then something happened to it. Nothing. OK, next question!

CGW: How about a little word association? Jack Thompson.

MK: That guy's a [jerk].

JH: Well, understand that Jack Thompson has taken a very vocal stance against us. We really see it as a response. He said he'd donated money to charity, and he went back on his word. We just helped him out.

CGW: So what exactly happened with the FBI, anyway? Didn't Thompson report you for harassment?

MK: The FBI never called us. Nothing ever happened on our end. He is completely impotent. And it don't mean that in a sexual way. It's possible, I guess. He's old, so it could be true. But I'm saying, like, he is incapable of accomplishing anything, you know? I mean, he contacted the Seattle Police Department, and we never heard from them. He contacted the FBI. We never heard from them. He doesn't actually do anything except send mean e-mails and yell at people.

JH: He is the quintessential angry old man on his porch. Except that, you know, his porch has an opening facing the internet now. Like, he's just a modern incarnation of that caricature.

MK: Some people listen to him, but I think that that's going to sort of taper off if he gets himself in more and more of these situations where it's obvious to not just us, but everyone else, that he really is crazy. In the last few missives that we've read from him, he's invoking the Lord and stuff. He imagines that he's on some kind of holy crusade.

CGW: So which games have been corrupting you these days?

MK: On the computer, it's *WOW*. I still play *WOW* pretty much every night on the Dark Iron server. And when we have our friendly e-mail talking feuds with PVP [Scott Kurtz's webcomic], a lot of it takes place in-game. It's been really slow lately. I haven't been playing much besides that.

JH: I'm out. I'm happy to say that I'm free and clean.

MK: He's three months clean.

JH: I feel like I have emerged from the Schick

Center for Addiction Recovery. I breathe deep, clean air.

MK: Still, every time a new patch comes out, I see him in there checking the patch notes. I guess it's like driving by the liquor store.

JH: Yeah, and just remembering it. Just kind of smacking your lips.

MK: Yeah, yum, yum, yum.

JH: But I mean—yeah, like I said, I try to play just about everything. I've been having a lot of fun... Pretty much everything I pick up recently, I'm just in the mood where I can find the good stuff in just about anything. But that after-Christmas lull is harsh. March is just the catchall for all the stuff that didn't make it out for the holidays.

But what am I back into playing now? I'm having a lot of fun with *City of Villains*. I also spend a lot of time with independent games. You play *Oasis*? I love that. I'm also looking forward to finally playing *Star Wars Empire at War* and *LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth II*.

CGW: You're becoming a megacorporation, with T-shirts, a collectible card game, and now the book.

How about I slip in a plug for your new book right about now, then?

JH: Whoring time!

CGW: *Attack of the Bacon Robots!* is in stores now. I like how the book is similar to a DVD director's commentary track but in comic form.

JH: Yeah, I did that [commentary] for the first two years of the strip. Just about a month ago, I wrote the second book, and then I imagine that, before summer, I'll sit down and write the stuff for the year after that. So it's actually pretty fun.

CGW: It feels like a little time capsule of the game industry.

JH: Exactly! And that's the way I tried to promote it there in the introduction, that it's sort of like a historical artifact. Because that stuff isn't important now, like a set of drivers that 83 put out for TNL rendering—that was a whole comic back then.

CGW: Old-timers will start having flashbacks when you rail on *Morty* and *Dalkesta*.

JH: That's what I'm saying! That stuff is ancient. No one remembers it anymore. Try to find a website for that stuff.

CGW: I'll have you know that I had to review *Morty*.

JH: Oh, you poor soul!

MORE AT CGW.IUP.COM

You think that's it? Man, you don't know half the story. We rapped with the *Penny Arcade* guys for a while. We didn't even have room to get to the good stuff, like when they got into a fight with sci-fi author Harlan Ellison. For the "director's cut" version of this CGW interview, plus a chance to win a signed copy of their new collection, *Attack of the Bacon Robots!*, you need to get online right now.

DID YOU KNOW?

Children's Place, Inc. recently formed by Penny Arcade, raised \$200,000 for children's charities in 2006.

▶▶ JACK THOMPSON IS THE QUINTESSENTIAL ANGRY OLD MAN ON HIS PORCH.

—JERRY TYCHO HOLKINS

BATTLE PLANS

A closer look at the world of *Guild Wars: Factions*

ENXCE GAME NCsoft DEVELOPER ArenaNet GENRE MMORPG RELEASE DATE April 2006

THE WARNING LUXON AND KURZICK CONTINGENTS LAY AT THE EPICENTER OF THE upcoming *Guild Wars: Factions* campaign. Have an early look at a handful of the game's key areas, including a few locations the conflicting factions would give anything to control. / Ryan Boett

KAINENG CENTER

This sprawling city acts as a bridge between Factions and the original *Guild Wars*. Players should reach this area about 20 percent of the way through either campaign.

THE JADE QUARRY

The waves of this frozen sea of jade form one of several contested areas that the Luxon and Kurzick factions wage war over.

PENWOOD

Kurzicks ambushed the Luxon in perpetuating control of this fort, which is a danger to the region.

ZENSAJUN

Many Canthans and local nightmen embark on pilgrimages to this valley. Zurnai, an important faction of Shing, is located here, and is a key mission area home.

SHING JEA MONASTERY

Canthan adventurers study in this tutorial area to learn more about their lots in life.

UNWAKING WATERS

Formerly the site of the floating Harvest Temple, this mission map is a giant, frozen whirlpool with the temple now buried beneath the ocean's surface. Unlike in conventional missions, the two factions must work together—making Unwaking Waters one of the game's first cooperative story missions.

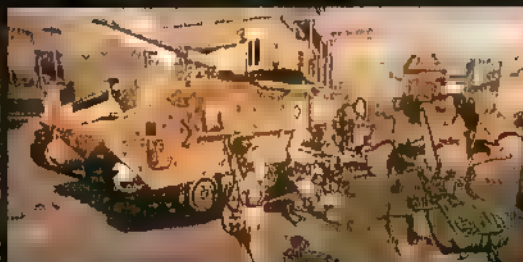
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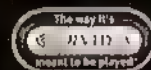
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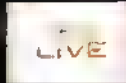
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PlayStation 2



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SEISMIC SCIENCE

Carmack-created tech rocks *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*



EVER THE CHAMPION OF OPEN-SOURCE software, id cofounder John Carmack is engineering technology he expects the competition to copy, science of the inevitable sort he's convinced will set graphics standards when its first iteration debuts in developer Splash Damage's army-versus-army shooter *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*. "Megatexture," as it's called, insinuates buzz manufactured for effect, a term too concocted, too disposed for trademarking. But Carmack, candid on triumph and fudge-up alike, pulls no punches. / **Shawn Elliott**

CGW: What's megatexture?

John Carmack: Tiling textures, or repeatedly placing a pattern over geometry in games, is really a specialized form of data compression—one that allows you to take a smaller amount of info and replicate it over multiple surfaces, or multiple parts of the same surface, since you generally don't have enough graphics memory to get the exact textures that you want, everywhere you want them. In the real world, though, there aren't any repeats; not even things that look like they repeat really repeat. Megatexture removes the resource restrictions. If you still see some repeated textures, it's because a designer decided not to bother. An artist can add 10 million little tiny touches to a level if he chooses.

We've seen this over and over as we've gone through graphical technology improvements over the years, where stuff starts seeming dated when it doesn't have the cutting-edge capabilities that we're expecting. And this type of unique texturing, I think, is going to be one of those over the coming generation of games.

The technology system at Splash Damage is

specialized for terrain. It works well for topology. Since I started the megatexture stuff, I've been sort of struggling to find some way that I could apply a similar technology to everything, to use it in a more general sense so that we could incorporate it in architectural models and characters and things like that. And finally, I did find such a solution, the one we're using now in our new... err, in another title I'm developing. And that was one of those happy programmer moments, when I knew that this was a positive sign for what we'd accomplish artistically with the game. I hadn't hit on the right thing for a long time, and then, when at last I did, it was a good moment.

CGW: So the old paradigm, so to speak, involved focusing on specific parts of the painting, adding flourishes here and there, where you're concerned with applying that same attention to the entire canvas?

JC: Or providing a better-fidelity canvas to put the entire thing on.

CGW: And it's been a rewarding breakthrough, even in the context of all your other accomplishments?

JC: It's difficult to tell, but definitely in this generation of technologies that I'm working on. And I do think that the unique texturing technologies are

"IT'S NOT POSSIBLE TO SEPARATE PLAY FROM PRESENTATION."

—JOHN CARMACK

Essentially, megatexture tech enables multiple—argh, my frickin' ass is on fire!



the most important of all of the things that I've done and will have the most significant impact. I generally prefer technologies that affect everything uniformly across the entire game world, and this is one of those.

CGW: And just how hardware intensive is this technology?

JC: Interestingly, it isn't as demanding as a lot of things that we've done before. And while this precise implementation wouldn't have been possible prior to the modern generation of graphics cards, the fundamental idea might've worked on the old 3dfx cards. Because I decided that it was going to work better for gameplay, I went with bump mapping and dynamic lighting and shadowing when I started developing *Doom 3*, but it's a technology that I'm surprised no one else wound up pursuing.

CGW: So you're saying with *Enemy Territory*, not only was the timing perfect, but the title would particularly benefit from the tech?

JC: Yes, and we're using some stuff that Splash Damage is doing—they've made some great strides. You know, I wish that they were working on a title that was a little more mainstream. *Quake Wars* targets a specialized market. I wish it had a single-player component so that more people could appreciate some of this, because to some degree, multiplayer gaming downplays the

importance of graphics. You're focused on players, as opposed to the general experience. It does help, however. Good graphics are the hook, and then it's up to gameplay to keep them there.

CGW: What about when graphics are gameplay, where the two work together so well that it precludes the ability to say, "Here's one, and here's the other?"

JC: It's not possible to separate play from presentation. Sure, you could pull off certain intellectual puzzles that are essentially pure gameplay with no presentation, but in modern videogames, gameplay is inextricably intertwined with presentation. The whole idea is that you're trying to immerse someone in a world in some way. And by the same token, if you take a great game and make the graphics 10 times better, it's now a better game with no input whatsoever in terms of gameplay.

CGW: And yet *ETQW*'s graphics might be less appreciated because the game is multiplayer?

JC: Well, what with the competitive component of *Quake*: you can walk into a tournament or something and see all of these people with settings so low it's a blurry mess, where they absolutely don't care about the visual presentation, and that shows that you've got great gameplay. If they're able to gain any amount of responsiveness at the expense of graphics, they'll do so.

Still, it's very important to have visuals that

pull people into the game—where it's tough for a typical consumer to get too excited about a game that's too plain, where you have to learn to enjoy the experience rather than [passively] being entertained with the presentation.

CGW: Is megatexture technology in any way limiting? Does it mean you can't deform or dynamically change terrain once you've laid down that single texture?

JC: No. There's no limit. Still, any time you're investing more and more labor into something, it strongly discourages you from making changes because you don't want to throw away the work. Finding out that "Well, this mountain isn't helping gameplay here, we should move it over here and stick a river through it" can cause pain. And that's something that's been getting worse and worse for gameplay for a decade. It's fundamental. Now, you can design in the simplest possible world where you're pulling in all of your visual details after determining that the gameplay is good, but that's difficult for a number of reasons. Other companies, I think, have been better about it than id. Up through *Doom 3*, we were never able to do that—level designers would always say, "We want to make this stuff look good," and then would spend a lot of time making stuff look good instead of working with blocks. This time, with our current title, we've [learned the lesson].

^ Nonrectangular rope: apparently still some ways away.



CGW: Seems challenging in cases where so much of the experience is showmanship, slowing down to eyeball detail in sections specifically designed for it....

JC: What we did do with *Doom 3* that works out well is to have artists actually produce the lush showpieces. The level designers know that this part of the level will look like this but have nothing to do with it. Now they can concentrate on gameplay—make it fun, feel free to hack it up. We'll worry about integrating the graphical money shots later on.

CGW: Public perception of you often centers around your love of the technology of making games—perhaps even more than your love of, say, the finished product. Is that an accurate assessment?

JC: As I've said, gameplay is intertwined with presentation. And I've never pursued a technology that I thought would negatively impact gameplay. It's always, "How will this technology improve the game?" That said, it is true that I'm not the final arbiter of what's going to make our games fun. I'm not necessarily representative of our target market, and now [id Software's] Tim [Willits] generally

makes gameplay decisions. But I do make sure that the technology that I help provide, which is sort of the canvas that everything is painted on, will positively improve the whole experience. I'm more narrowly focused now. I mean, it's true that I used to write essentially all of the code for everything. But because technology has become more demanding and we have to have more and more [developers] on a project, I've retrenched to where I have the most to offer.

CGW: Has this been rewarding or restricting?

JC: Game development as a creative process was probably more fun when teams were much smaller. The end products are much more dramatic now by any measurable means, but you don't have the same sense of complete ownership over a project when you've got so many more people on it. And that's a negative. But you can't do much about it, unless you choose to migrate platforms [e.g., cell-phone games].

CGW: So while we're getting greater drama and dynamism in big-budget games, we're sacrificing the fingerprints? Is that a fair trade?

JC: I do miss one part of the early days, when

half a dozen people would work through and finish a project. Those days, unfortunately, are just gone.

CGW: Will megatexturing help mod teams? (We're making the connection in terms of smaller teams.)

JC: It doesn't help them. And in general, technological progress reduces the ability of mod teams to create something significant and competitive. We've seen this over the last decade: In the early days with *Doom* or *Quake*, you could take a pure concept idea, put it in, and see how gameplay evolved from there. But if you're making new models and new animations now, you essentially need to be a game studio doing something for free. Almost nobody considers doing total conversions anymore.

CGW: So...?

JC: So...graphics technology is still exciting, and there are still significant things that we can show to people that'll make them say, "Wow, this is a lot better than the previous generation." And I do think that drastic use of texturing will define this generation. On its own, even with no newer presentation technologies, allowing unique texturing on surfaces, I think, is the key enabler for this generation. As soon as graphics programmers see this type of stuff and read an article about it, they can go out and start implementing some of the same things. And I expect that to happen.

"GAME DEVELOPMENT AS A CREATIVE PROCESS WAS PROBABLY MORE FUN WHEN TEAMS WERE MUCH SMALLER."

—JOHN CARMACK

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ESCORT

MMO games get a new character class: call girl BY SHAWN ELLIOTT



SHADOW ECONOMY

ON THE SURFACE, SOCIAL EXPERIMENT *Second Life* is clean living: an oft-cited MMO used for college-level coursework in the design of digital spaces, in art and architecture, and in media studies and sociology. Count real-life Stanford Law School professor Lawrence Lessig among its 148,000 citizens: this January, the copyright guru addressed an in-game gathering to promote his recently published book, *Free Culture*, and embossed online copies with an electronic signature (to glorify the performed-for-publicity gimmick, he mentioned inviting members of Congress to create accounts).

Insofar as consuming and creating makes them so, *Second Life* citizens who're neither enrolled at state universities nor capable of persuading congresspersons to appear in virtual utopias are similarly upstanding. Because residents retain the rights to what they build and buy, *Second Life*'s goods and service industries boom. According to Catherine Smith, director of marketing for *SL* owner Linden Lab, "In January

of 2006, *Second Life* residents exchanged \$1,384,752,765 in-world 'linden' dollars, or over \$5 million U.S. dollars, based on the current exchange rate of 276:1." Gowns, cars, kittens, rocket packs, lunar rovers, condominiums, turntables, couches—players make or mod scads of shop and show-off opportunities in *SL*'s unbounded buyosphere, from personal appearance to animations to architecture. *SL* citizens are designers, crafters, cinematographers, engineers, civic planners, real estate agents. And prostitutes.

OLDEST PROFESSION PRACTICED HERE

Amster-Dame, one of *Second Life*'s red-light districts, can't decide what to wear. A patchwork of imported JPG porn and candy-coated graphics, it's the Id-as-Image series, a woody in kaleidoscopically shifting search of wank material. On one side of the canal-cleaved street, an adults-only cinema flashes real skin flicks free of charge for the horny or hard up. On the other, *Blade Runner*-esque boutiques vend mixable, matchable parts—pristine, tattooed, or pierced.

Taboo Heart (who'd rather CGW not reveal her real name) is on the job, along with the many other working women milling around here, making bedroom eyes at browsing passersby. "I enjoy standing on the corner, meeting people who might walk past," she confides. "I talk to them about anything, although I won't approach someone and ask them if they want my services. Other escorts do. When someone is interested, they normally send me an IM and request a price or my note card, which has relevant information about me on it." And what these won't tell you about Heart, her affiliation—inevitable and bizarre—will: "I'm in a group called 'Gender-Verified Female,' otherwise known as 'GV Female.' In order to become a member, you must first have a voice conversation with one of the group officers."

While Amster-Dame molls agree to ask a fee of no fewer than LS500 (\$1.76) per 30-minute trick (to bar underbidding), they do compete for clients and coin with fingerprinted performances. "Language is an effective and essential tool," Heart says. "And when you combine talk with audiovisual cues, the possibilities are endless." Because Amster-Dame's player-made hotel and Kama-Sutra-swing-equipped penthouse are programmed to enable illicit behavior (with possible positions essentially coded into the game space), sought-after escorts design



"THIS BODY GIVES ME AN OUTLET TO ATTRACT PEOPLE TO MY PERSONALITY."

—TABOO HEART, SECOND LIFE ESCORT

MISSION



additional amusement. "I recorded myself masturbating and cropped that into bits I could bring into *Second Life*," Heart brags. "I even imported pictures of my own body to further personalize things."

Similarly, Khanea Suntzu, another B-girl, shuffles self-recorded sound bites while shifting through lurid, ready-made movements, "creating a flow to the encounter and establishing a sense of consistency. It's labor-intensive," she says, "like juggling, just like a magic show."

Jeroen DeGroot, an agog john who's blown LS12,000 (\$44) on solicited sex in a single month, says good escorts "might include graphical effects when appropriate. Walking around in a virtual world matters. The girl you meet might take you to a sleazy motel or a scary dungeon, or maybe she'll show you someplace you haven't seen before—stuff you won't get on the phone. Nonetheless, language is cardinal; complex computer interfaces often become obstacles to satisfying cybersex."

Significantly, *Second Life*'s world simulates more than mere erotica. Sex, it seems, is provocative—but also intimate—in a place where students complete coursework and artisans sideline as strippers. "People lead normal SL lives," DeGroot says, "with friends, homes, jobs, and the like, and it makes sex special. It's more gratifying than starting up some cheap sex game secretly by yourself. People identify with their avatars; they remember their

pasts and plan for their futures—it makes these experiences more real and rewarding."

Plus, without some by-the-book SL livelihood, johns like DeGroot would end up fronting real cash for linden dollars (online resources such as LindeX or third-party currency exchanges let residents convert linden bucks to U.S. greenbacks and vice versa). It might happen, however. "Matter of fact," Suntzu says, "the medium's introducing a new mode of consumerism that, in a few years' time, will surpass TV. The SL sex industry's potential is massive. Imagine it: Make a better interface, and all the [people] who now use chat programs such as MSN or AIM will arrive, by the millions overnight, endlessly masturbating like Energizer Bunnies."

Of course, the call girl's cut of the windfall, should the forbidden fruit really ripen, is bound to pale in comparison to that of the pimps, procurers, and captains of the cybersex trade. After toying with the idea, the virtual entrepreneurs behind Amster-Dame gentlemen's venue The Barbie Club turned down my invitation to talk, but Suntzu thinks she's sussed out the figures in their hush-hush books for herself. "They take a house cut of 20 percent for every trick turned, which, on average, would be about LS150," she says. "I see stuff every several minutes, so that would add up to about LS1,500 an hour, 24/7. You do the math, but my worst estimate says that that's several tens of thousands of U.S. dollars per year." \$47,608, to >

be precise. And bona fide tycoons traffic in more than just brothels and strip joints. As Suntzu says, "All these clients need man parts and male animations to complete the package, and the cheapest cost \$1,500. It's like selling candy in a cinema."

HIDDEN HANG-UPS, HIDDEN DESIRES

While it's enough for DeGroot to say the sex is satisfying, we—perhaps voyeuristically—want to know why it's satisfying for women like Heart (then again, the assumption that women think through their libidos might not be so insulting after all). To Heart, for whom escorting isn't the primary source of RL

income other SL call girls depend on, "The money is a perk, but I escort for the erotic aspect," she says. "I'm exploring myself as much as I'm exploring the men I service. *Second Life* offers a space to safely experiment with all types of sexuality—from the mundane to the most taboo—and, unlike with

cameras, you remain anonymous."

Meanwhile, world-wise Suntzu says she'd loved to have landed work in the actual Amsterdam sex industry but couldn't cope with medical complications: "It's that longing that spurs me toward the sexual spectrum of experience in SL. Still, I have other, deeper reasons I won't divulge here—everybody, without exception, has hidden desires, hidden hang-ups demanding to be resolved and savored."

As Heart shows me up a flight of stairs to a secluded room and says, "This is where I work," her tone slips candid, and she confides: "Because the majority of avatars in *Second Life* are alike, in that they're all beautiful, you aren't being judged by appearance alone. You asked what's the most exciting thing for me. I like being wanted. This pretty body gives me an easy outlet to attract people to my personality." Later, when she's virtually shown all there is to show "virtually," her avatar lifts a finger to outline a large frame in the air. Colors coalesce pixel by pixel; it fills with a forming image, an RL snapshot of Heart's "first" face.

SEX AND THE SECOND CITY

While propositioning women (not for pillow talk, but to share their thoughts on this virtual and actual vocation), I meet one who wants absolute anonymity: no names, in-game or out. "Shedding light on what we do," says a girl we'll call "Lana," "will force the Linden family

to do something about sex in SL and change the dynamic." No mere fermenting revolutionary, she's also smart. "It's the Heisenberg principle. The very act of visiting to study this will change it fundamentally," she says. "We'll be flooded with every lonely heart unwilling to grasp the game, every last fanatic who wants to save the Internet from sex." I'm here to include her in a story she'd rather I drop in order to become a character in hers.

Lana, I learn, does not like DeGroot. In creating RL kink-and-tell site *sl-escorts.com*, where he recounts and rates his explicit encounters under the alias "Tommy Thompson," DeGroot has broken the sacred fourth wall and violated the SL terms of service, which prohibit the reprinting of private chat conversations. Sounding more and more like a *Sin City* whore circling her wagon, convinced that the authorities (SL's owners at Linden Lab) are willing to look the other way only so long as what happens in Amster-Dame stays in Amster-Dame, Lana says DeGroot is dangerous. "As it is, the escort scene can be disbanded, and the women who're being exploited could disappear."

For his part, DeGroot insists it's nothing personal. "Some people say I shouldn't publicize the experiences I have with escorts without asking their permission first. I see their point. But from my side, the women sell a performance, and since we're paying for it, it's fair to review it. I'm not, however, rating people—this is a profession, and if you want to make money selling sex, you have to be skilled in having sex."

Heart, too, suggests that Lana's ilk are self-serving: "I like Jercen's site for one reason and one reason only: It exposes the girls who don't care about what they're doing, the ones who think they can 'oh baby, oh baby, yeah' through as many guys as they can in a day and get rich."

In response, Lana pooh-poohs, points to the apparent conflict of interest in DeGroot's practices (his site hosts ads paid for by both girls and brothels), and goes on playing at street corner Cassandra. "So, you and your article? Escorting may not exist in the context you report on by the time it sees print. But you're going to be pigeonholed and push it anyway." She's spot-on, of course. A month lead-in is an eternity in *Second Life*'s time-lapse towns; and I'd reconsider intruding on the same terms of service DeGroot snubs. While I ultimately understand Linden Lab's interest in publicly promoting its creation as a destination where Stanford Law professors mingle with progressives and where tomorrow's intellectual property flaps are settled today, I can also say that, if it wants to earn its namesake, *Second Life* should have space, too, for the tattling, the cattiness, the sex.

ADULTS ONLY

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➤➤ **"EVERYBODY, WITHOUT EXCEPTION, HAS HIDDEN DESIRES, HIDDEN HANG-UPS."**

—KHANNEA SUNTZU, *SECOND LIFE* ESCORT

CHICKS WITH CLICKS

ESCORT INTERVIEW

CGW: How much would you say you make escorting?

Taboo Heart: Escorting's my primary source of *Second Life* income. I make LS1,000 per sexual encounter, which, most often, requires approximately 30-40 minutes. I've made much more, but never less.

Khannea Suntzu: Around LS5,000 to LS10,000 a week.

CGW: How many clients do you have?

TH: I'm not tallying. It's not the mileage that makes the trip good. It's the scenery.

CGW: What are your limitations? Where do you draw the line, and why?

TH: No soldiers. No childlike behavior. No outting. No women. Another escort called me "the only hetero escort in *Second Life*." I'm sure that isn't true, but the majority of women in *Second Life* will experiment with other women, even if they're straight in RL. Me, I'm after an experience as close to real as I can make it and would rather not engage in a version of an activity I wouldn't find arousing in real life.

KS: Based on my personal convictions, which most people would find beyond offensive, I do not set boundaries in *Second Life*. I'll do anything, and I'll probably do it better than the client expects.

CGW: Anonymity seems important in these arrangements, but are you concerned with verifying the real-life ages of your clients?

TH: I never ask anyone's age, although I'll give mine. Age verification is done at the time of registration.

CGW: Have you encountered clients who want to break the "fourth wall," so to speak, and discuss their "first" lives?

TH: Yes, but not so much. People like to be anonymous. Anonymity allows people to be even more uninhibited.

KS: I've heard some pretty impressive stories, from those of [soldiers serving in Iraq] to [those of] people with severe disabilities. Then there are people, especially in more morally restrictive places, who have desires they can't express. I'm not talking illegal desires, though I hear gays still suffer some problems in Texas.

CGW: Why work for Amster-Dame rather than alone?

TH: To connect with clients. Freelancers have to wait for someone to contact them.

KS: Many of us would rather not deal with paranoid and rapacious club owners. Many of us would love to eliminate their 20-percent club cut. Anyone with a union-oriented idea to circumvent them could make a lot of money.

CGW: Are male escorts common?

TH: Females outweigh males. Maybe male escorts are more prominent in the furry communities.

CGW: How much do you think *SL* sex is weighted toward graphic depictions and language, as opposed to more of a general desire for intimacy?

TH: I wouldn't say *Second Life* is weighted more toward one than the other—it's a healthy mixture, spanning all aspects of human desire. That said, I have been hired for companionship. I think the guy wanted sex but felt uncomfortable trying to be intimate with someone he'd just met. We spent some time together and did a few friendly things. We shopped and talked. I helped him select some sexual items for his avatar. After two hours, he was ready to ravage me for being "real."

CGW: Do people join *SL* to use the escort service, or "innocently" use *SL* and then discover the escort service and find it too interesting not to try?

TH: It's not that people come to *Second Life* for the escort services—although, I think they soon find out that *SL* is full of sex, after which they look into escorts or escorting. I did meet one man who started playing because he read about me on the *Second Life* escort-ratings website and sought my services.

KS: My first day in *SL*, I stumbled into someone, asking him where to make money. That very same day, I was clumsily cybering./



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PlayStation 2



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A detailed, atmospheric photograph of a grand, ornate ballroom. The room features high ceilings, intricate architectural details, and multiple levels of balconies with decorative railings. The floor is polished and reflects the ambient light. In the background, there are tables and chairs set up, suggesting a formal event or gathering. The overall tone is dramatic and elegant.

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SEX, LIES, AND VIDEO

Why can't videogames have story arcs that include sex?

BY GEOFFREY JAMES

SEXLESS

MACHINIMA GETS RACIER THAN THE games with which it's built. Take *World of Warcraft*, for instance. Despite the MMO's seemingly scant potential for sexual content, Blizzard's community manager, Paul Della Bitta, estimates that as many as one out of 20 made-with-WOW movies contains material that Blizzard finds "objectionable." While many movies are more puerile than prurient (see the famous "The Internet is for Porn" music video), we're sure some machinimists would stage orc orgies if WOW's graphics engine allowed it.

Machinimists looking to add sexual realism to their projects are likely to be disappointed, though, at least in the short term. While a videogame may be the only place in the universe where a woman can put on plate armor and still look like a stripper on her snack break, mainstream gamemakers have no plans to add actual sex to their games, even if sexual activity is essential to the story arc.

Until recently, the trend seemed ready to tip. *Grand Theft Auto III* included off-camera oral sex (an activity that keeps with the game's general spirit), and at least two console offerings,

The Guy Game and *BMX XXX*, contained a smattering of bare breasts. But that was before *Hot Coffee*, a patch that unlocks a clothed sex scene in *GTA: San Andreas*, splashed cold water on even mildly suggestive content. At the time of its release, *San Andreas* sported an M rating, which, according to the ESRB, "is given to game titles suitable for ages 17 and older, [software that] may contain sexual themes, intense violence, and/or strong language."

Despite the fact that any teenager with an Internet connection can download porn that would give most parents a triple heart attack, the tepid *Hot Coffee* scenes unleashed a firestorm of self-righteous indignation from sources ranging from Hillary Clinton to the right-wing lobbying group Grassfire.org. "This is a true bipartisan issue," says Grassfire spokesperson Rod De Jong. "Conservatives and liberals alike agree that computer games can and do cause harm to our kids." The *Hot Coffee* imbroglio resulted in several class-action lawsuits that, according to De Jong, clobbered GTA publisher Take-Two Interactive's stock price. "That's a warning to any company that tries to lie to the public about the content of their game," he boasts.

THE INDUSTRY IS SCARED TO CREATE ANY CONTENT THAT CAN BE DEEMED 'ADULT.'

-TOM MONTAGNE, VICE PRESIDENT, RITUAL ENTERTAINMENT



GAMES

However, while Take-Two's stock is currently trading at around \$15 (down from a high of around \$25 in June of last year), stock analyst Gale Morison of Global Independent Research suspects that the company's woes might have less to do with the scandal and "more to do with larger issues, like consumer spending patterns."

Even so, the Hot Coffee fallout has game publishers freaked. "The industry's scared to create any content that can be deemed 'adult' right now," says Tom Mustaine vice president of *Sin Episodes* publisher Ritual Entertainment. "And that's true even when sexual content is integral to the plot."

Evan S. Wilson, an analyst at Pacific Crest Securities, believes that the flasco merely emphasizes the self-censorship that's become habitual in the game industry. "Consoles and handhelds are responsible for all but a measly seventh of the industry's revenues," he explains. "And companies like Microsoft and Sony generally refuse to license their develop-

ment software to companies producing games with sexual content."

Similarly, Wal-Mart and the other large game distributors generally refuse to stock games that patrons might consider objectionable. In short, says Mustaine, releasing a game with sexual content "just doesn't make business sense in multiple ways."

Ironically, companies promoting this prudishness aren't unwilling to peddle smut, provided it's not in videogames. Sony, for example, had no problem releasing the R-rated film *Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo*, which contains frontal nudity, and Walmart.com sells the R-rated film *Old School*, which includes a humorous depiction of statutory rape. Similarly, Microsoft's official eBook website, www.msit.com, carries over 1,100 books of "erotica," including such ripe items as *The Toy*, described on the site as follows: "When a young woman is kidnapped by two strange men, she finds herself at the mercy of >

sadistic lovers who demand total obedience. Pleasure and pain blur into one sublime experience, and she is tortured and adored by the men who hold her captive."

And yet, a nipple slip in an Xbox game spells the decline and fall of the Western world.

Console makers and game distributors, of course, are only reacting to the disproportionate outrage that sexual content in videogames seems to inspire. "The criteria used to push a game into unacceptable range is much different than for just about every other media," complains Mustaine. "Hot Coffee's content wasn't any more risqué than what you'd see in a standard R-rated movie, and the game already had an M rating, so why the controversy?"

Why indeed? The problem lies in the ESRB rating system, which is strangely skewed against the inclusion of sexual content, even in games likely to appeal primarily to adults. Curiously, a game rated M can contain oodles of ultraviolence, but if a single scene goes far beyond bikini-covered cheesecake, the game gets

the dreaded AO (Adults Only) rating, regardless of whether that content is as innocuous as dry humping or as disturbing as gang rape.

The problem with bundling everything even mildly sexual into the AO catchall:

It creates an opportunity for the multibillion-dollar online porn industry to blur the distinction between their game products and the products of mainstream manufacturers. Turns out that

XXX videogames are one of the online porn industry's fastest-growing categories, according to former mainstream game creator Brad Abram. Currently president of xStream3D, Abram is the creator of *Virtually Jenna*, an ultrarealistic sex simulator based upon the X-rated antics of porn star/author Jenna Jameson. "We cater to much the same demographic as the mainstream game companies," he says.

Abram promises that future versions of his sex simulator will include the ability to import characters from mainstream games. Instead of the ubiquitous nude skins that have the shape of whatever clothes a character might be wearing, characters converted to work with *Virtually Jenna*'s engine would have completely formed, highly realistic bodies, as well as access to dozens of sexual animations. "You'll finally be able to have virtual sex with your favorite night elf," Abram says. He also plans to add features, like background green-screening, that will make it easy for machinimists to meld sexual content into the video output of more traditional game engines.

But xStream3D isn't the only company

looking to leverage the pent-up demand for sexier game content. Porn site NaughtyAmerica.com is about to launch a Sims-like MMO with numerous sexual animations. According to producer Tina Courtney of developer Safe Escape Studios, "The more the gaming world explores the fascinating nuances between dating and flirting and sexual interaction—not just between men and women, but alternative lifestyles as well—the more compelling the content will be, and the larger the potential audience ultimately becomes."

Mustaine believes that mainstream companies will attack with haste and hostility should mainstream characters suddenly show up as XXX-rated avatars. "I seriously doubt gamemakers want to see their characters used in that fashion, and [they] would most likely go after anybody that devalued their intellectual property or their characters in that way," he says. Whether such legal action might prove effective is another matter; even media giant George Lucas was unable to convince a federal court to halt the distribution of the porn film *Star Ballz*.

Worst case: Mainstream game manufacturers could find themselves blamed for user-created XXX content, much in the same way that Take-Two was blamed when independently created nude skins transformed the bland Hot Coffee animations into soft-core porn. Some confusion is inevitable, especially in machinima, where it isn't always clear within a given project whether the output is from, say, *Half-Life 2* or *Virtually Jenna*. One thing's certain, though: Whatever mainstream companies do, this stuff will start popping up on the Web. "There's an enormous pent-up

demand for sexual content in games," Abram observes. "You can't get people hot and bothered with cheesecake and expect them to not want the real thing."

One solution would then be for game designers, publishers, and distributors to stop reacting with eye-rolling alarm every time the prudes get their shorts in a twist, and instead demand that videogames be treated with the same respect for artistic integrity accorded to other forms of popular media. That way, when machinima porn and XXX mods inevitably turn up, mainstream gamemakers can force them into a conceptual ghetto, much in the way that the movie industry marginalizes true porn by making sex an integral part of its product.

However, that scenario seems pretty unlikely, seeing how, like *San Andreas*' anatomically incorrect Hot Coffee mod, the gaming industry seems to lack a pair of something essential. /

➤➤ "YOU'LL FINALLY BE ABLE TO HAVE VIRTUAL SEX WITH YOUR FAVORITE ELF."

—BRAD ABRAM PRESIDENT, XSTREAM3D

BROKEN SWORD: THE ANGEL OF DEATH

The saint of modern adventure games returns

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Revolution Software GENRE: Adventure RELEASE DATE: Summer 2008

PREVIEW

ADVENTURE GAMES, ONCE PC GAMING's top category in the faraway '80s, now wane to near nonexistence. Fan-created remakes and tributes (see our report on the *King's Quest IX* project, *The Silver Lining*, in CGW #280) aside, few games embrace the pure puzzle-solving and story-heavy emphasis of this now-niche genre. But *Broken Sword* developer Revolution Software still holds the torch defiantly high—and thanks to overwhelming pleas from loyal fans, the cult series that began with *Circle of Blood* in 1998 continues 10 years later in *Broken Sword: The Angel of Death*, the fourth title in the franchise.

As in previous *Broken Swords*, *Angel* features plenty of now-trademark factors: murder mysteries, international locales, cryptographic clues, and a heroic investigative lawyer. This time out, series protagonist George Stobbart falls for a beautiful, yet enigmatic, woman, only to have her inevitable disappearance lead him on another "world on the brink of disaster" escapade alongside his longtime sidekick, reporter Nico Collard. Then the puzzles ensue. And unlike its predecessors, *Angel* makes no compromises for second-rate console cousins.

BACK WHERE IT BELONGS

Charles Cecil, managing director of Revolution Software, comments on the series' PC exclusivity, explaining, "An Xbox 360 version is very

much under consideration, but [we're writing] *Broken Sword: The Angel of Death* specifically for PC. *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon* was written with the PC and console versions in parallel, which led to certain compromises. [By making *Angel*] PC-only, we are free to really push the boundaries in terms of the technology and graphics."

PC exclusivity also means the return of another much-requested PC hallmark: a point-and-click mouse interface. "Who said point-and-click is dead?" Cecil jokes, knowing full well that he himself said it back when *The Sleeping Dragon* launched in 2003. "I really liked the direct control interface that we employed previously," Cecil says. "But I completely respect that some people prefer using a mouse. So we've incorporated both direct and point-and-click control—and, indeed, a combination of both—into [Angel's] interface."

Cecil doesn't take these sorts of conveniences lightly, either. One more, for the record: *Angel* assumes no previous knowledge on the player's part, meaning *Broken Sword* neophytes can dive right in. "We work very hard to ensure that any [Broken Sword] game can be played without reference to the previous games," Cecil explains. "This is why we call each game by a name, rather than a number. Obviously, we include references to characters and situations that occurred previously, but not to the extent that a lack of knowledge is detrimental to the game experience." Denise Cook and Ryan Scott



Search the Internet for clues! It's the new fad!



This guy's gotta be up to no good.



We are blande. We are hot. We solve crimes.

"WHO SAID POINT-AND-CLICK IS DEAD?" CECIL JOKES, KNOWING FULL WELL THAT HE HIMSELF SAID IT BACK WHEN *BROKEN SWORD: THE SLEEPING DRAGON* LAUNCHED IN 2003.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY



THE GOOD

GALACTIC CIVILIZATION II: DREAD LORDS

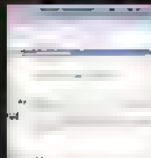
Everyone's gone gaga over *Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords*. With piles of glowing reviews that most independently published games never see, along with unbelievable sales at retail chains (despite the game's complete lack of copy protection—take that, piracy paranoids!), *GalCiv2* developer and publisher Stardock finally gets its 15 minutes of fame.



THE BAD

ACCLAIM...BACK FROM THE DEAD

Onetime industry giant Acclaim returns under new ownership after folding last year. The company's new mission statement: "What happened to playing with other people?" The new Acclaim's first efforts are a pair of MMORPGs called *Bots! II* and *9 Dragons*—and now you officially know as much as we do. At least Acclaim can't sink much further than it did the last time it was around.



THE UGLY

STARFORCE VS. STARDOCK

That lack of copy protection on *GalCiv2* we mentioned? A bitter message board admin at StarForce (the copy-protection company we took to task in our last issue) publicly provided forum users with a working link to a *GalCiv2* download, claiming that "Several thousand people are downloading the pirated version. Is it good for sales?" Sounds like somebody's mad that Stardock didn't pay its protection fee.

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V

One unpopular demo later, *Heroes V* is back and almost ready. And, hey—it doesn't suck!

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Nival Interactive GENRE: Turn-based Strategy RELEASE DATE: Spring 2006

HANDS-ON PREVIEW

DO NOT ANGER FANS OF FANTASY strategy games. They may look like wan, undernourished extras from *Highlander III*, but they take their gaming seriously. Just ask the folks at Ubisoft and Nival Interactive, who found that out the hard way this January after releasing an early demo of the upcoming *Heroes of Might and Magic V*—only to be faced by such a barrage of hate that they delayed the game's release so they could retoc its gameplay.

The anger was understandable. The *Heroes* franchise was one of the most beloved (and best) turn-based strategy series for a decade—until former publisher 3DO killed it with 8,000 expansions and the disastrous *Heroes IV*. When Ubisoft picked up the license in 2003, hardcore fans were torn: rejoice because it's back, or cringe because it should have stayed dead? The

January demo seemed to answer that question.

Now it looks like we should thank the angry fans, because the extra time seems to have done the game well—if the most recent beta is indicative of the final release. I was able to play through the entire first single-player campaign (the game features six in all). And while it was incomplete, the core gameplay (including adventure maps, turn-based combat, creature balance, and A.I.) was intact—and, surprisingly, I had a blast. "Surprisingly" because I was one of those hardcore fans cringing at the very thought of this game.

Nival (best known for the *Silent Storm* games) did a solid job of reaching its stated goal with *Heroes V*: to re-create the feel of *Heroes III* (before the series went sour) while bringing the graphics into the 21st century.

Each campaign centers around one of the game's six factions; each campaign is divided

into five scenarios. The opening campaign, also the game's tutorial, introduces the Haven faction—the humans. Though Nival created an entirely new fantasy world rather than continuing the old *Might and Magic* plotlines, the creatures correlate to what experienced *Heroes* players are used to, with units (all upgradeable) including peasants, footmen, archers, griffins, priests, and angels. The town screen, like everything in the game, has received a nice graphical upgrade but functions very much as it did in *Heroes III*, with one building purchasable each turn and creature generation occurring at the start of each week.

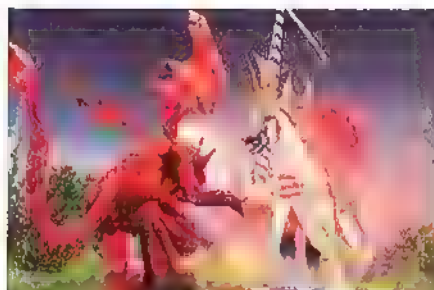
The biggest graphical change, of course, is the move to a 3D engine, both on the adventure maps and in combat. What could have been a useless novelty fortunately works quite well—if not always enhancing gameplay, then at least making the world feel more "alive," just as Ensemble achieved with *Age of Empires III*. The

DREAMFALL

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THE FUTURE HOLDS SECRETS





The new battle animations don't add to gameplay, per se, but they look awesome.



Prebattle troop layout is crucial this time.



I capture the enemy castle 'cuz I'm great!

varied terrain and elevation—and the animations that play when you capture resources points—are beautifully rendered, while maintaining the “lightness” and friendliness of the old *Heroes* games. The downside. You need to rotate the camera quite a bit to discover all of the goodies on the map, as stuff now hides behind trees, rocks, and other obstacles.

All combat takes place on a 12-by-10 grid (Ival experimented with multiple sizes but, after testing, standardized this one). The pre-battle “tactics” screen is more important than ever, as variable unit sizes (paladins, for example, take up four spots on the grid, as opposed to just one spot for archers) mean that you may

not have room to get all your units onto the field. And random obstacles, such as boulders and logs, can block units from moving. As on the adventure map, battle animations are just eye candy. But they're good eye candy, with the 3D engine swooping in to a close-up view (sometimes at eye level, sometimes overhead) of the units battling it out, with nice attention to detail both visually and sonically (you'll hear arrows clanking off of iron golems, and zombies spewing noxious green gas when hit). It adds nothing to gameplay, per se, but since you spend at least half the game on the battle screen, it's not a bad idea that it's actually interesting to watch for the first time ever in the series.

What I *didn't* get to see in this build, unfortunately, is the new “dynamic combat system,” which supposedly offers a faster alternative to standard turn-based combat. But the turn-based mode, I'm happy to report, functioned just as in the old games, with the A.I. mostly acting intelligently and providing a reasonable challenge even in these early missions.

It's hard, honestly, to muster much enthusiasm for a series that got screwed up for so long and is now in the hands of new a developer...who still has plenty of time to screw it up. But my eight or so hours with the first campaign of *Heroes V* gives me great hope, however foolish that may be. Assigned to play it for a story, I ended up completely in that blissful, drooling “just one more turn” game-lock of the original games. Given the fiasco that was the first demo, this is big progress indeed. **Jeff Green**

WITH A NEW 3D ENGINE, YOU NEED TO ROTATE THE CAMERA QUITE A BIT TO DISCOVER ALL OF THE GOODIES ON THE MAP.

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TEQUILA ON THE ROCKS

Get trigger-happy with John Woo's *Stranglehold*

PLATFORM: Midway DEVELOPER: Midway Chicago GENRE: Action RELEASE DATE: Fall 2006

PREVIEW

PRIOR TO JOINING THE HOLLYWOOD in-crowd thanks to silver-screen successes like *Face/Off* and *Mission: Impossible II*, director and screenwriter John Woo thrilled Asian audiences with some of the finest gun-fu ever to grace Hong Kong cinema. Woo's films *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Killer*, and *Hard Boiled* rank among his most popular works—all violent, fast-paced crime epics starring fan-favorite leading man Chow Yun-Fat.

Now Woo and Chow are heading to the PC screen, at long last, in Midway's *Stranglehold*, an imaginative action-adventure with Chow playing Inspector "Tequila" Yuen, the surly, trigger-happy detective he originally portrayed in 1992's *Hard Boiled*. The actor lends both his voice and likeness to *Stranglehold* (though his in-game model looks significantly younger to reflect the game's mid-'90s setting), and you can expect plenty of the same relentless, take-no-prisoners attitude that made Inspector Tequila such a memorable Hong Kong action icon.

GIVE A GUY A GUN, AND HE THINKS HE'S SUPERMAN

Tequila's obviously gotten into some more

trouble since the events of *Hard Boiled*. *Stranglehold*'s story—developed by Woo—involves a conflict between two underworld Triad mobs: When the upstart Golden Kana gang kidnaps the granddaughter of Dragon Claw top dog Mr. Wong in a bid for power, all hell breaks loose. Oh, and the damsel in distress? She also happens to be Tequila's ex-wife. Needless to say, this upsets the maverick detective, who quickly finds himself at odds with both sides of the law as he embarks on a chaos-filled rescue mission.

Let's get something straight: Games like *Max Payne* and *Enter the Matrix* ripped their gameplay conventions straight from the cinematic creations of John Woo. Gimmicks like dual pistols, high-unlimited ammo, over-the-top environmental turmoil, and slow-motion destruction were made insanely popular by his action-crime dramas; these, and other Woo trademarks, come out in full force in *Stranglehold*—run-n-gun firefights versus dozens of enemies, a handy slow-mo feature, plenty of highly destructible vehicles and environments (courtesy of Unreal Engine 3) in both Hong Kong and Chicago, and context-sensitive stunts that make Tequila look as cool as possible when he's filling two-bit punks full of lead.

GIVE HIM TWO, AND HE THINKS HE'S GOD

"Panache" is the watchword here; you rack up "style points" as you interact with the environment in visually exciting ways while taking down your targets. The game highlights key areas of your surroundings, and with the press of a button, you can dive behind objects, shoot enemies through walls and ceilings, and even relive one of *Hard Boiled*'s classic moments by sliding down a banister while simultaneously unloading a pair of hand cannons into the sea of gangsters in the restaurant below.

You don't have to lift a finger when it comes to some basic actions—If you hit a table or wall, Tequila automatically slides across or swings around it. And even when you're engaged in a stylish display of acrobatics, the game handles most of the legwork, leaving your trigger finger free to inflict more bloody carnage. You can even expect a Mexican standoff or two (or five...or 20...)—along with a multiplayer mode specifically keyed toward this particular Woo-ism—joining the obligatory deathmatch and capture-the-flag modes. Now all we're missing is Tequila's trademark toothpick. Ryan Scott

BUZZWORDS FOR DUMMIES



TEQUILA TIME™

Translation: Slow-mo. You know, that thing that *Max Payne*, *Enter the Matrix*, and other games have—except now with an edgy new name.



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Translation: Stuff blows up. This is Midway's way of saying: "You can destroy objects in the environment."



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COLUMN

GLADSTONED

Is the world ready for *Gymkata: The Game*?

INSOMNIAC RANT

DURING ANOTHER sleepless night, around 3 a.m., I realized that *Gymkata* is a great movie. Or, at least the idea of alympic gymnast Kurt Thomas as the master of a deadly, point-to-point, hand-to-hand martial art and you're able to contain the vomit (unaided) threatening to devastate your DVD player. I sat there, mesmerized—not by the kung-fau exploits (or the lack of a weaponized rhythmic ribbon dance), but by the ungodly plot and acting that makes Johnson spin in his *Plan 9* movie. I can't do more in this Other like-minded place out there than dig bad movies. Otherwise, Paul Walker wouldn't have a career.

What I can't figure out is why it's acceptable to kick back, grab a drink, and laugh at a B-movie...but kicking back and laughing at a B-game (anything below the dreaded game rankings.com 60 percent mark)? That's just isn't done! Maybe it's because it's tough to sit back and enjoy a bad game. You have to play it. More likely, nobody wants to spend upwards of 50 bucks on a feasting mound of crap. The trick is to read those reviews, and then look for the really awful stuff in the bargain bins. Not the superbuggy games that ravage your computer like syphilitic orange worms in *Heat* (*Dungeon Lords*), just the games that are rife with broken English, strangled dialogue, and painfully bad concepts. The best place to start: anything conceived and created in Europe with little or no localization. In other words, look for games by German publisher GDV, the

king of the gaming industry. That's why I'm so ecstatic about *Lula 3D*? What, and you're not the force of nature that was concocted by Robert Coffey's April Scorched Earth column (GW #261)? Just revel in the fact that in the first 15 minutes of the game, our heroine changes accents three times. She speaks bad English, bad German-slanted English, and she's British? What the hell? At least the sheila-coded *Si* graphics have text floating in the window to identify the people-ish things moaning in the background as a "F***ing Couple." Thanks for this, trying to play *Lula* is like spanning *Poleon* with partial nudity on *Glenn*—not something

you actually want to admit to.

Here's a bargain-bin beauty from 2003: *Grom...Terror in Tibet!* Race the world's most hidden Tibetan treasure while dodging the most as the cigar-chomping "Grom" (voiced by George Clooney soundalike) through a campaigner, packing a hefty punch with a healthy slice of humor." OK, you probably won't find an action-adventure-RPG anywhere else with an honorable mention for one reason: It's a how where bad voice actors go home. And then you get the equally facial translations. A player named Grom says to Grom: "I don't want a...you... You've got only few seconds left. You... You're wacky British humor that... You... You're plenty more gems like that..."

Now even it comes to FPS games, it's not about kill Nazis, zombies, or just... just... That makes *UberSoldier* damn near perfect. You're a Nazi-made zombie super-soldier, slaying Nazis, zombies, and... and... and... that ain't all: You're a zombie super-soldier with limited combat abilities, a shield, and a game with zombie bullet time. Strangely, it isn't as bad as you think, with enough Jack Daniels to keep you from the fact that these WWII Nazis speak in western English while reciting Maro Ecko's *Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure*. If you've ever sat through an MTV Sci-Fi Channel original, *UberSoldier* is for you. As for you, GDV, you magnificent bastards: Keep doing what you're doing, and I'll never have a dull night again. /



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FREELOADER: RTS
THE GAME: *Steam Brigade*
WEBSITE: www.pedestrianentertainment.com

Back when I was but a wee freeloader, I played on an Apple IIc. Yes, the wicked-cool, semiportable Apple that had a built-in 5.25-

inch floppy drive. Whoo! I ran that computer into the ground playing *Rescue Raiders*—one of the first RTS titles ever made. That game was kind of like *Choplifter* (another classic action game in which you operate a helicopter on a 2D, left-to-right scrolling map) but added the strategy element of grabbing bunkers, deploying units, and ultimately taking over the enemy base. *Steam Brigade*'s 2D steampunk tribute is equally awesome. The game looks fantastic, plays well, and sends me back. Waay back. If you have a hanker-ing for old-school gaming, this is it. /

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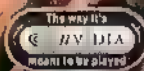
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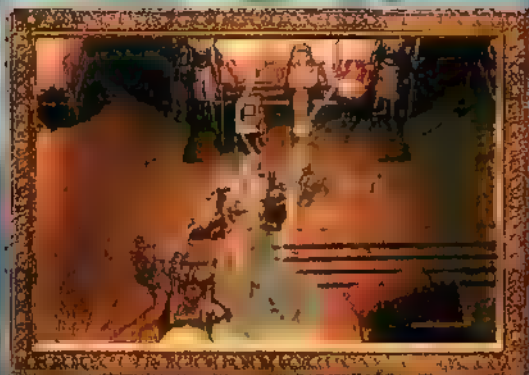
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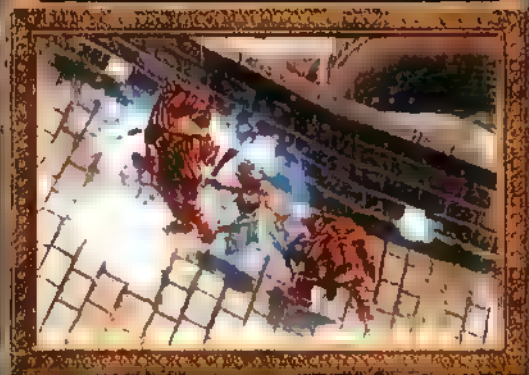
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INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR: T.L. TAYLOR

Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture

INTERVIEW

➤ THAT T.L. TAYLOR CALLS HER FOUR-year-plus stint playing *EverQuest* an ethnographic project implies A) the associate professor at the IT University of Copenhagen's Department of Digital Aesthetics and Communication found an ingenious remedy for grinding-associated guilt (it's research!), or B) the MMORPG's culture is sufficiently complex to study seriously. Go figure: Games, as Taylor's new book *Play Between Worlds* puts it, are fundamentally social spaces. The guilt thing? Read on. / Shawn Elliott

CGW: Should MMO designers perform the work of sociologists, so to speak, designing for culture?

T.L. Taylor: Interestingly, companies like Xerox PARC, Microsoft, and many others have long tapped into this more actively by hiring anthropologists and sociologists to work alongside designers. While game designers are certainly practicing (and often quite accomplished) "lay sociologists," I think it would be quite interesting to see more formally trained people brought on board.

CGW: One of the tricky aspects about a game like *EQ*, you argue, is that many of the things that are seen as nuisances or difficulties encourage the creation of emergent culture (for example, few transportation options fostering player porting).

TLT: Definitely. My point is that sometimes when designers try and make things too easy, they may in fact undermine a social mechanism that can be quite valuable for the game. More broadly put, design choices will always be social choices, and designers just need to be reflective on that.

CGW: Popular wisdom says that women prefer the social aspect of MMOs, but is that telling the full story?

TLT: Definitely not. And indeed, if you look at all the "social work" men do in MMOs, it isn't telling us the full story about them, either! What I found in my time playing alongside and talking to women in *EQ* is that they enjoy a range of things about the game, not least of which were the feeling of mastery and progressing through it, the status they got from being accomplished players, the ability to explore a vast world, and the fighting and tactical elements of the game. If you think about it, that sounds a lot like what men—what all players—enjoy about the game. I think that for far too long we have easily dichotomized what we say women and men like, to the disservice of how actual men and women live their lives and play, often alongside each other.

CGW: When publishers wonder what a woman's game looks like, you write, "It's as if suddenly the entire experiences of women who right now do play, of women who have played for years, are hidden off in a corner lest they overly complicate our notions about what 'real' women and men take pleasure in." Why might this be so?

TLT: This is an incredibly difficult question to answer. On the one hand, I think there is a degree of organization and industrial stasis at work. Companies would really, for example, have to reorient budgets and how they conceptualize markets. The organizational commitment to change to undertake this would have to be significant, and as it stands now, I think it is seen as very risky. But the deeper angle, I think, is that this imagination of women's play (or, more accurately, lack of) is deeply tied up with a much larger dichotomization of gender our culture circulates. Reformulating our notion of women and play means, at some level I would argue, reformulating our notion of women, of femininity. And by extension, men and masculinity. And that is big, big work.



CGW: You write about the rhetorical linking of cheats with professional or power players. Similarly, in FPSes, it's "Yeah, if I played 24-7, I could talk trash, too," where the accusation is that playing that much isn't playing fair. Would you speculate on why we see this special disdain reserved for players who conflate play with work?

TLT: I think there are at least a couple factors at work. The first is that, at a very simple level, accomplished players seem to the more casual player as truly possessing some kind of "sixth sense" for the game. They can anticipate moves; they can execute elegant and seemingly effortless tactics; they seem to get more out of the game than the average player. If you do not play at this level yourself, it can certainly appear as magic, and—since we don't yet have a system for understanding this as we would, say, traditional sports, where people are often said to be "naturally gifted," or to understand the role of training in excellence—a primary way of making sense of it is as cheating. We have yet to reckon with, to create a way of understanding, dedicated and accomplished computer gameplay.

But the second level is, I think, a much broader one, and it is the notion that work and play are, and indeed should be, inherently separate. This is a historical convention, and it may be that we are circling back to a moment in which our labor and play might be more intimately linked. I would argue it is actually unfortunate that most people are not afforded work that can feel pleasurable (i.e., playful), and that play is somehow cordoned off as not serious (i.e., childlike). But what we find in MMOs is that play is truly a complicated mixture of the joyful, the boring, the painful, and the pleasurable, and that the dichotomy between work and play (one I think also relegates adults to a fairly unplayful life) might be eroding a bit. But we are, to repurpose MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle's notion, "betwixt and between" two moments, and so we see debate and tension about the status of work and play, especially in adult lives.

➤ "PLAY IS TRULY A COMPLICATED MIXTURE OF THE JOYFUL, THE BORING, THE PAINFUL, AND THE PLEASURABLE"

—T.L. TAYLOR

WARCRY

Is Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning ready for the world (of WarCraft)?

PREVIEW

▶ A GOONEY, BRO! BUMPERS INTO VIEW: THE MIDDLE OF THE demo of Mythic Entertainment's new MMO, *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning*. Run into the middle of a battlefield, stab dying dwarves, and swipe their scalps. After all, your war boss needs a new rig. Meanwhile, back in the real world, we wonder if Steve Perkins, Mythic's director of marketing, will acknowledge the 6-million-subscriber elephant in the room. "World of WarCraft is a fantastic game," he offers. Guess so. "WOW could be the last great classic" MMO experience. Anything that comes out now needs to offer a whole lot more. Perkins continues, "We hope *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning*, or WAR, is the game that WOW players will want to graduate to." Bold words. With a little coloring, he gets bolder: "[WOW's] player-versus-player battles are superficial, at best. You watch one small group of guys battle another small group of guys in a specific zone where they have to meet up. That's not what PVP is all about," Mythic, the developer that practically invented online-versus-online combat, is declaring all-out war. Can the makers of *Dark Age of Camelot* properly bring the Warhammer tabletop game to life and make it relevant in a post-WOW world?

A WORLD AT WAR

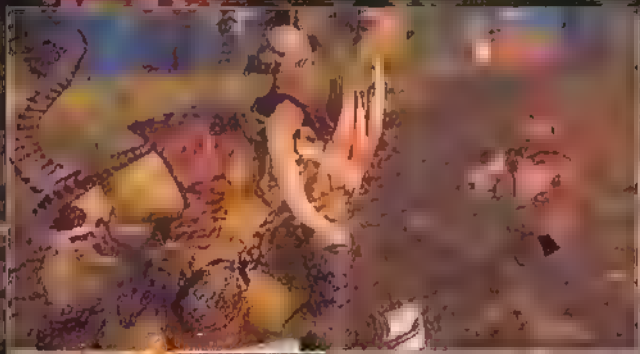
Folk unfamiliar with Warhammer's image might think to themselves, "Hey, these screenshots look a whole lot like another MMO with the 'war' prefix," but check the numbers: Warhammer magazines, newsletters, and books have been selling for almost 25 years now. WarCraft games, on the other hand, have been around for approximately 12 years. But the UK-based Warhammer franchise has only built up steam in the U.S. somewhat recently. Many years ago, a Warhammer RTS was supposed to show up Statewide. Never happened. Meanwhile, Blizzard's *Warcraft* became a household name in America (and Statewide) and London, to name a few other places.

"This isn't *World of Warcraft*, and you know it," says Frodo. There are no happy endings here. "I'm not talking about the world of Warhammer. I'm talking about you. You're not in the land of innocence here; it's a dark place. It's a dark, dark, dark, dark, dark place. The best way to describe what's happening is to think of it as 'Middle-earth meets WWII.' Six races fight, and form alliances, and you know it, it's a little familiar, we know. To preserve order, the Emperor of Mankind has gathered together with high elves and dwarves (working-class dwarves, not the shiny ones), Dark Elves, orcs, goblins (love it, soccer-hoofers, it's a good one), and goblins—not the noble, King-of-the-Hill warriors in WOW), and Chaos warriors (mutated former members of the Empire) make up the forces of destruction."

OUT OF CHARACTER

In most games (once you pick a class, you're stuck with it for life), if that logic held in the real world, you never would've had the chance to change majors five times before settling on that Ph.D. in keg stands. Plus, PVP combat gets old fast if everyone has only a few set classes to choose from. The point is that Warhammer lets you choose your own way once you've chosen one of two archetypes: the Warrior or the Adept. For example, let's say "Ah-nuld" starts his career as a warrior by going down the path of a ranger. He can study to be just that and learn to track his prey better than anyone else in the game. Or maybe he wants to change careers. Once he acquires all the skills in a single career, he can move on to another. "Ah-nuld" wields his hand at becoming a dual-gun-toting pistolero or

PUBLISHER: Mythic
DEVELOPER: Mythic
GENRE: MMO
RELEASE DATE: Spring 2007



▲ "Nobody/nobody get hurt."

eventually master riding heavy warhorses and brandishing huge swords as a knight. It sounds a lot like *Diablo* II's time-tested trait development, but the twist is that nothing's stopping you from learning very different disciplines.

Perkins also insists that this *Warhammer* focuses less on level numbers as opposed to skills and looks. As you improve, it's visibly apparent how powerful you've become. You won't want to screw with some hulking orc holding a sword the size of your body—and yet, to advance, you need to start killing. Time to get off your ax.

BABY'S FIRST BATTLE

WAR hopes to make you a part of something bigger than yourself. You won't be killing rats to prove your mettle in the beginning; you're defending your town from invading forces. If you're a dwarf but want to help your high-eff allies, pack your bags: You're off to their homelands. For the sake of our preview, though, let's focus on the dwarves and their mortal enemies, the greenskins.

Oscar the orc is tasked with finishing off dying dwarves and taking the prize pelts back to his boss. The flip side—a dwarf player is going into the same area on a rescue mission. His objective: to bring life-giving beer (we're presuming Pabst) to the fallen fighters. A couple of tugs off the bottle, and they're back in the fight. That means more NPCs will rise up against Oscar. What you're seeing from the start of the game is an amazingly clever meshing of MMO soloing, player-versus-environment gameplay, and realm-versus-realm competition.

The idea is that every action you take—whether it's a PVE gathering mission, a simple two-combatant skirmish, or a massive battlefield fight for in-game resources (lumber mills or temples, for instance)—will further your side in the war. Control a zone, and you could cripple an enemy's resources. The illustrated map spread here shows exactly what you'd need to do in order to control a zone.

"Every single map in *Warhammer* [approximately 33 total—*EW*] will integrate PVP and PVE content," Perkins says. *WAR* forces gamers to interact with each other, even if they don't plan to fight each other. "You could play through the entire game as PVE," he says. "But you'll miss out on a lot of cool content." Same goes for PVP. All told, each zone has a 700-page design document—a tome full of quests, background material, and history.

With all this talk of war, you might think Mythic's forgotten all about crafting and the finer things in life. As Perkins put it, "You won't be making any quilts in *Warhammer*...unless you're lacing [them] with an infectious disease." What Perkins could say is that crafting will revolve around the war effort, but that's still in the design phase—where a lot of the game is right now. With only seven months of actual coding done, using a highly evolved version of the *Dark Age of Camelot* graphics engine, *WAR* looks promising. But a lot of work that lies ahead for the ambitious MMO—not to mention a *WarCraft* stigma that needs overcoming. /Darren Gladstone

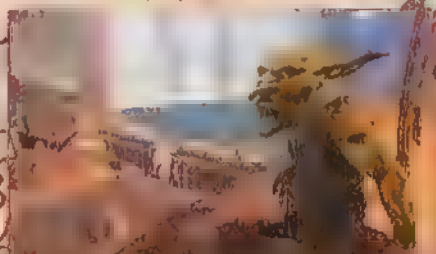


▲ Hulking, high-level orcs look as powerful as they are.

WARFRONT

The orcs and dwarves are having border disputes. This map represents how the flow of battle progresses along two colored routes. The red line leads into orc territory. The green line goes toward the dwarf capital. That's a neutral no-man's-land that must be captured in order to take the enemy's capital city. Each numbered area is a huge zone playing host to PVE and PVP content. Completing various goals for your side leads to the eventual victory and leads you one step closer to the enemy homelands.

BLACK MOUNTAIN



MOUNT BLOODHORN

The first assault on greenskin turf has dwarves looming over the falls in a barrel for a beechhead assault.



EKRUND

Orcs attack the fringe of the dwarven frontier.



PORT OF BARAK VARR

Look closely in the background, and you'll see a couple of siege machines. You'll be able to work with them in the game.

THE MOOT

MARSHES OF MADNESS

This is as good a place as any to cover insanity and fate. You don't die so much as you slowly go insane. Fate points, WAR's gaming muligan, let you recover from fatal blows. Once you tempt fate (i.e., run out of points, which slowly recover), you start dealing with skill penalties. Rather than an XP debt, the punishment is more of a time debt. A penalty box, if you will. You can work off the penalties in battle (with diminished XP) or, if you start getting owned, rest up and stop playing for a bit.



KARAK EIGHT PEAKS

This is a former dwarven city...but these days, it's considered the greenskin capital. If the dwarves successfully route the orcs, they own the city. It's theirs to explore and loot. If, at the end of 24 hours, orc players haven't rallied, an NPC army of orcs rolls in to reclaim their land. The battle zones reset, but any loot you pilloaged is still yours.

BARAK VARR

KARAG DRON

That's what the orcs call it. The dwarves call it Thunder Mountain. Who's right? Time to fight. If you don't have enough people for epic skirmishes, the game supplies NPCs to fight alongside you. Obviously, they're not as good as real, live humans, but there's no need to wait 20 minutes to gather enough people for big battles, either.



BADLANDS

EIGHT PEAKS

KARAG DRON

KARAK AZUL

BLACKFIRE PASS

Combat can get hairy in this game—it's not the usual turn-taking variety. A blend between the systems of Baldur's Gate and the Final Fantasy games, combat uses action points and timers. You can allocate all of your action points into a massive attack. Or you can jab, and if the enemy blocks, you can mount a counterattack.



KARAZ-A-KARAK

The dwarven capital.



MARSHES OF MADNESS

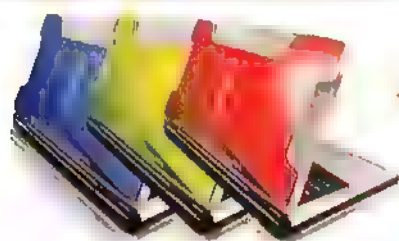


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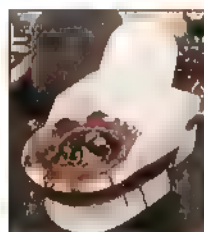
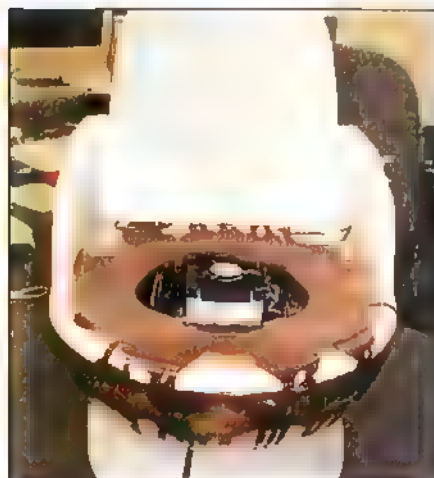


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DUDETTE, YOU'RE GETTING A DELL!

➤ ONE GANDER AT THIS BERIBBONED, BEADED, braided box is all it takes to imagine its maker, Mike at fury-pc.com, exclaiming: "Honey, I heated up the glue gun just for you!" or "The woman wanted a PC, so I stuck the drapes to her Dell!" or "Baby, I'm only on it all the time because it takes me back to our wedding!" The real story, or at least the one Mike tells the world, is more poetic than pragmatic. "It was time to make our five-year relationship official," he says. "And I couldn't think of a better way to pop the question with a prop more representative of me. The timing, too, was opportune, as she needed a new PC."



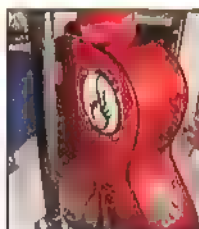
DUMP SITE

➤ JUDGE "TUB GIRL" OF TOPEKA'S ANNUAL CRAP case contest dismissed Dean Liou's entry for lack of technical merit (no corn), and inadequate intrigue (no nearby Maalox). But hey, the flusher serves as a power switch. Liou says the Wal-Mart-bought training toilet and doo-doo-colored Krylon set him back \$9, but he offers no real explanation as to why, other than that he can answer, "Sure is," when asked if it's really his dump site. In other words: R&B scat-maven R. Kelly made Liou sign a nondisclosure agreement when he commissioned the work.



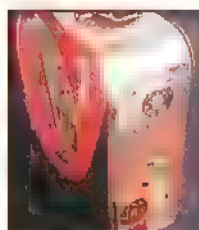
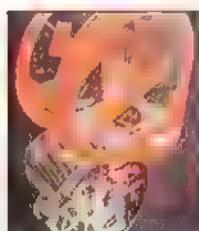
DOLLED UP

➤ AT LONG LAST, LIFE'S BIG, BURNING QUESTION is answered. How much processing power can an underage maid hide under her hair? Not much. For all the PVC, styrene foam, and filing and sanding, Japanese modder Katsuya Matsumura's masterpiece packs a paltry 1GHz processor and 12GB hard drive... but damn if it doesn't look incriminating when the FBI bursts in! Should you spot a man in search of wire and foam at Jo-Ann Fabrics, throw him out. He's just going to love whatever he makes.



OVERCLOCK AND ROLL

➤ SHE'LL NEVER KNOW YOU'RE A NERD...UNTIL THE voices of your Ventrilo-using chums come through the built-in Creative I-Trigue 3300 speakers. Dean Liou, the same database and computer network consultant behind the potty-chair PC (previous page), strung together this acoustic ensemble for an Intel press event (visit envador.com to commission your own dream machine). "What I didn't want was a standard ship-in-a-bottle mod, where you cram computer parts into a confined container," Liou says. "So I added a few features that would set this apart, like a hidden, remote-controlled, spring-loaded DVD burner with a drive door cut into the side of the computer. When the DVD drive ejects, a section of the side of the guitar opens up to allow the tray to extend." Rockin'.



BLACK MESA BOX

➤ "THE MISTAKE FIRST-TIMERS AND OLD HANDS alike make," says master modder Geno of virtual-hideout.net, "is what I call a lack of vision." Cow spots, plush upholstery, neon this, LED that—when anything goes, so does good taste. One solution, Geno says, is to "narrow down and define design goals." We'll settle for the passing mark in metal shop, thanks./

➤ ➤ HOW MUCH PROCESSING POWER CAN AN UNDERAGE MAID HIDE UNDER HER HAIR?

CRUSH YOUR ENEMIES

...and see them driven before you, with *Age of Conan*

PREVIEW

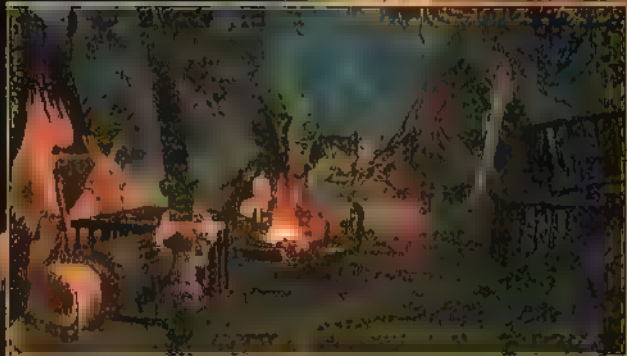
BIG-ASS SWORDS. SEVERED heads. Piles of bodies. One larger-than-life man against the world. For fantasy fanatics, these images spring to mind when someone mentions the name "Conan." Author Robert E. Howard's dark warrior, popularized in the '80s by Arnold "Governator" Schwarzenegger's big-screen title role in *Conan the Barbarian* and its lackluster sequel, embodies bloody, visceral action—a fact that Funcom's upcoming RPG *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* doesn't forget.

The basics: Create a character belonging to one of four fantasy staples (warrior, mage, priest, or rogue) and embark on adventure across the lands of Hyboria, developing your character through 20 levels of experience in a lengthy single-player campaign. Once you reach the end of this journey, things get more interesting: *Age of Conan* awards you a class specialization (with anywhere from four to seven distinct choices, depending on your initial archetype selection), and the game opens into a massively multiplayer experience, taking you through an additional 60 levels of combat-laden questing and player-versus-player carnage. Take a peek at each of the game's unique combat modes. / Ryan Scott



REAL COMBAT

The basic combat mode uses something that Funcom calls the "multipoint melee system," which enables players to exploit weaknesses by striking at six specific points around their enemies. These include a forward thrust, a high attack, and four diagonal attacks; players can fluidly combine them for effects ranging from extra damage to area-effect stun attacks. This adds a layer of activity and strategy that most MMOs lack. Don't expect a mindless clickfest here.



RANGED COMBAT

This first-person mode—which encompasses ranged weapons like bows, as well as magic spells—works like an FPS, where you aim at distant opponents with a reticule and then let loose. Mage characters can weave multiple spells together into a mystical container and hurl them at foes, but this carries the risk of a condition called soul corruption. Which, in the words of game director Gaute Godager, makes a character "more prone to have bad things happen to him."

MIES!

PUBLISHER: Funcom
DEVELOPER: Funcom
GENRE: RPG
RELEASE DATE: Spring 2006

Instant Messages

Internet Cynic says:
Hitting level 20 puts
your name on yo oide
ballot!



MOUNTED COMBAT

Mounts serve as more than just another mode of transportation in *Age of Conan*. By taking advantage of the terrain and the opponent's position, a rider can gain extra protection from his mount and trample or charge at advancing foes. Smart players can utilize the extra speed in other ways, too, using it to slice through groups of enemies in one quick pass. Trained mounts can execute their own attacks, too.



FORMATION COMBAT

Characters of the commander class (one of several prestige classes available early on) excel here. A group of players or NPCs forms a set of "ideal positions" around their leader; when everyone acts in unison, participants gain bonuses to combat and spellcasting, and the formation leader can utilize special attacks. For instance, the act of "digging in" turns the formation into an impenetrable wall that prevents other characters from penetrating the line.

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MUSIC MATISYAHU: LIVE AT STUBBS

AMAZON.COM, \$9

If there can be a Christian heavy-metal band, why not a Hasidic Jew with some lyrical flow? At first, you think it's just a gimmick—a rabbinical reggae artist. But you don't need to stick to the Old Testament to appreciate the vibe. Close your eyes for a second and just listen. Matisyahu (aka Matthew Miller) channels some of the Jamaican greats on tracks like "Chop 'Em Down" and "Sea to Sea," but for the love of God, Matt, please don't ever beatbox again. Why couldn't Hebrew school be more like this? Oyl



PULP PENNY ARCADE: ATTACK OF THE BACON ROBOTS

AMAZON.COM, \$11

Hard to believe that it's already been eight years since the popular Web comic Penny Arcade had its humble start. The daily trials of two guys who like playing videogames soon turned into a cottage industry, and this "director's cut"-like book gives a snapshot of PA's first two years. Want to learn more about the men behind the book? Check out this month's CGW interview with Gabe and Tycho on page 24.



BOOK JUICED

AMAZON.COM, \$10

Jose Canseco has been portrayed as an a**hole over the years. Love or hate the baseball All-Star, he's led an interesting life—and his book goes into great detail about what happened after the game. This "trendsetter" was the first big major-league steroid abuser back in the 1980s—way before all the hoopla of our man Barry. You can't help but want to read about Canseco's fascinating—and at times obnoxious—claims ("I owe my entire career to steroids") and how he introduced the drug cocktail to the sport. Yay for him!



CUBIST CUBE WORLD

THINKGEEK.COM, \$30

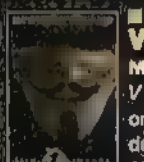
Forget about your other battery-operated buddies (ahem), these surreal little cubes may hypnotize you once you plop them on your desk. Digitized stick figures play simple games with you, utilizing two exceptionally cool little factors: a built-in gyro for orientation (turn it upside-down and the cute little fellows fall on their heads) and magnets. Link two or more stick figure cubes together and watch as they interact with you—and each other. Is this a little frivolous? Maybe, but aren't you worth it?



MUSIC MORNINGWOOD

AMAZON.COM, \$11

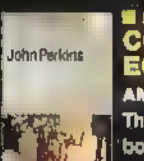
Sometimes you want to chill. This, however, is not one of those occasions. True to its name, Morningwood's debut starts off hard and fast. The high-impact kick-start of "Nu Rock" roars. Short, punchy hooks shove the music into your ears, and Chantal Claret's growling vocals catch you off guard. What is ferocious in one song occasionally switches to soft, lilting, Juliana Hatfield-worthy lyrics. This album features enough memorable tunes like "Nth Degree" and "Jettsetter" to make it worth a download.



FILM V FOR VENDETTA

MOVIE TICKET, \$10

V for Vendetta needs to be seen on the big screen. What's the big deal? Obviously, you haven't read Alan Moore's classic graphic novel upon which the movie is based. The year is 1998 (still way in the future when Moore wrote it back in 1981), and a neofascist regime controls Great Britain. The only one fighting back: a terrorist who calls himself "V." The big question is if the Wachowskis can successfully rebound after the Jackluster end of their Matrix trilogy. The other question...will Natalie Portman marry us?



BOOK CONFESSIONS OF AN ECONOMIC HIT MAN

AMAZON.COM, \$10

This amazing and controversial book tells one writer's tale of how America built up U.S.-friendly, third-world nations all over the world to expand an empire. Author John Perkins recounts his experiences as a former "economic hit man" for the U.S. over the past 20 years, explaining what he did and breaking down the tactics involved. Critics are divided on whether Perkins offers a version of the truth or just a self-serving indulgence. Either way, it makes a fascinating read.



PULP ADVENTURES IN THE RIFLE BRIGADE

AMAZON.COM, \$9

If you fear screwed-up, dark humor or have any reservations about the boundaries of decency, do not pick up this collection. All the rest of you, let's get to it: Garth Ennis is one of the sickest writers on the comic circuit today. Where else will you find a half-baked British Dirty Dozen during World War II out to capture Hitler's mystical missing testicle? Yes, you read that right. Rated "T" for "Twisted."

PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games!

APRIL 2006	PUBLISHER
Auto Assault	EA GAMES
Bad Day L.A.	Enlight Software
Commandos Strike Force	Eidos Interactive
Faces of War	Ubisoft
Guild Wars: Factions	NCsoft
Hearts of Iron II: Doomeday	Paradox
Heroes of Might and Magic V	Ubisoft
Kneepuke	DreamCatcher
Mage Knight: Apocalypse	Namea
Origin of the Species	Tri Synergy
Paradiso	Ubisoft
Rogue Trooper	Eidos Interactive
Struck with Daniel Negreanu	Myelin Media
Tomb Raider: Legend	Eidos Interactive
World Soccer Winning Eleven 9	Konami
World War II Combat: Road to Berlin	Groove Games

MAY 2006	
Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures	Funcom
Battleground Europe: World War II Online	Matrix Games
Company of Heroes	THQ
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	Aspyr
Fuel	DreamCatcher
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft
Heart of Empire: Rome	Paradox
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos Interactive
Just Cause	Eidos Interactive
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	Midway
Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends	EA GAMES
Rush for Berlin	Paradox
Snow	2K Games
Specnaz: Project Wolf	Tri Synergy
TimeShift	Atari
Train Master	Tri Synergy
UFO: Extraterrestrials	Tri Synergy
War for Terra: NY Invasion	Tri Synergy

JUNE 2006	
Half-Life 2: Aftermath	Valve Software
Madden NFL 2007	Electronic Arts
Neverwinter Nights 2	Atari
NFL Head Coach	Electronic Arts
Prey	2K Games
Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War	Midway
The Sacred Rings	DreamCatcher

POCKET CHANGE: \$0

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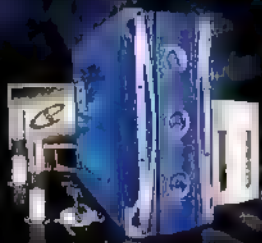
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GAMERS GONE WILD

➤ GOT DUCT TAPE? GAS MASKS? YOUR six-month supply of vitamin-fortified powdered milk? Because terrorism isn't just fear of tall buildings or taking off your shoes at airports anymore. On February 20, 2008, *World of Warcraft* guild The Imperial Order served notice that it was holding its server, Detheroc, hostage. The guild was the first to complete a series of competitive quests that awarded the winner power to ring a virtual gong—and thereby unlock new content for all. However, The Imperial Order refused, choosing instead to ransom access to the goodies for 6,000 in-game gold. "We'll have plenty of time to conquer this new content," read part of the guild's frank post to Blizzard's official Detheroc forum. "But for now, we see an endless novelty

in holding it hostage."

This gave gossip sites a snappy hit-soliciting headline ("Blizzard Hostage Crisis!"), but what slipped under the radar was the number of news/blog/forum responders actually egging on The Imperial Order. "This is a lovely example of emergent gaming," read a comment posted to Guardian Unlimited's Gamesblog. "The developers of the game probably thought this'd never happen, but somehow, out of the components of the game in combination with the rule set, it has, and it's taken everyone by surprise. Great stuff." Blog site digg.com collected comments like "I think it's brilliant," and "Attaboys! You make 'em wait!" while one poster lamented that the guild hadn't instead asked for real-cash ransom. Another summarized simply: "Jihad!!!!"

Twenty-four hours later, The Imperial Order

placated players and disappointed cheerleading anarchists by revealing that the entire stunt was a hoax, but the highly visible prohostage posters stood as testament to shifting winds on the MMO development scene. More mob mentality? (Beat the piñata with a stick!) Or something more?

CROUCHED AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

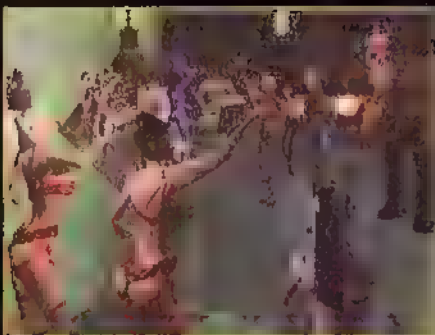
When someone—oh, say, your neglected, estranged significant other—asks you why you play ("those expletive, expletive") online games, what do you say? Delayed gratification? Being someone else? Power fantasies? All those nubile elves in BDSM duds? Chances are, somewhere between boasts and pseudo-epistemological bluster, you mention it's "for the sense of community," the "everyone's tuned in to the last episode of *Friends*"



▲ Funcom's upcoming *Age of Conan* hopes to combine single- and massive-multiplayer gaming.



▲ In 2005, *WoW* players stripped and clogged traffic over issues with the game's warrior class.



▲ *Anarchy Online*'s "professionals" relay concerns from players to the development team.



simultaneously. We want to feel like we're part of something bigger, to forget (temporarily) that we're often just a single body seated on a couch or hunched at a desk for endless hours in front of wires and lights in a box.

Humans are storytellers. Kids do it by reflex, and even jokes are stories (as is all that sordid intraoffice watercooler gossip). If you play an MMO, you probably game with relatives, real-life friends, or people you only know online (and, ironically, better than your next-door neighbors). Whether we're regaling our guildmates with juicy renderings of harrowing escapes or PVP slapfests during mad mid-morning MMO "instances" or simply bemoaning what we did in some real-life drunken stupor, few of us log on to mutely tromp around a virtual world, solo grind, or just sit silently, admiring polygonal scenery. We want to tell tales about who we are and what we're up to.

"What appeals to me about MMOs really evolved over time," says Craig Morrison, community relations manager for Funcom (*Anarchy Online*, *Age of Conan*), describing how he came to online gaming. "When I started, I was very much the 'achiever' type of player. I played to win and to be as powerful as possible. Over time, and especially as graphical MMOs replaced MUDs, I grew to love just

exploring the worlds created for these games, and then slowly became drawn into the community surrounding them—to the point that I often find it hard to enjoy single-player games anymore. There isn't anyone to talk to."

Morrison views MMOs as having a "socializing" impact on introverted players who come onboard with traditional accomplishment-driven goals, then gradually switch gears—call it social stratification through experimentation. "Right from the start, *Anarchy Online* developed a very strong, coherent community that wasn't just fixated on the gameplay itself," Morrison explains. (*Anarchy Online* was released in summer 2001). "The world of Rubi-Ka had nightclubs that players could visit; it had countless outfits and clothes-related personal items that were purely for social use. When I started as a player myself, I met many others who were playing the game specifically to partake in social events, or even just to roleplay."

By "roleplay," Morrison means in the older-school sense: not just fantasy hack-and-slash, but to earnestly "become" another entity—transformative catharsis. Or, as Freud might have put it, "creative daydreaming." Adds Morrison: "It really opened my eyes to the possibilities for the entire genre as a medium for social interaction beyond just

comparing recent loot and achievements."

Five years later, we know how to get online and rap or swing swords with each other, but we're still running around in loincloths and curve-clingy leather bikinis whacking hordes, delivering packages, and at best, motioning to each other with a few canned gestures. Where do we go next?

CITIZENS UNBOUNDED

The early 1990s were all about first person (*Ultima Underworld*, *Doom*). In the mid-'90s, it was 3D acceleration (*Quake*, *Tomb Raider*), and by the start of the 21st century, we'd progressed to sandbox gameplay (*Grand Theft Auto III*). In 2006, the new drive-by buzzphrase is "emergent gameplay" (hate it already?), and you'll find it on the lips of nearly every next-gen game developer. Tiring of tightly scripted virtual worlds where "interactivity" consists of depopulating kill-or-be-killed monster spawn or just shooting the bull with friends, sharper-than-conventionally-credited gamers are beginning to clamor for more control over what they can do within increasingly volatile game worlds. Even player-invented slang terms like "grinding" hint at a lack of satisfaction with one-dimensional leveling up. What's a bored gamer to do? What else? Break something.

Bored or no, players—by definition—push boundaries. Take a game that's monotonously monsterific, and you'll get virtual Shakespearean troupes staging plays and selling tickets. Censor speech or public discourse, and you'll get underground mall-list >



FIVE YEARS LATER, WE'RE STILL RUNNING AROUND IN LOINCLOTHS WHACKING HORDES. WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?



▲ *Dark Age of Camelot* is known for its friendly player base and active community managers.

newspapers or virtual riots. Even in behaviorally open-ended worlds, gamers will try time and again to imprint themselves onto their environments. "We encourage our players and communities to come up with new systems to further immerse themselves in the game worlds, and many do," explains Sony Online Entertainment (EverQuest, Star Wars Galaxies) global community relations director Alan Crosby. "We've had minigames, new player contests, newsletters, role-playing groups, player-run lotteries, and other in-game ways to add a stronger sense of community than message boards might provide."

Funcom's *Anarchy Online* even has its own in-game player-run radio stations. "It's just a matter of time before we see this kind of thing much more integrated into the game design itself," adds Funcom's Morrison. "Developers will be the conduit and provide the tools to allow players to enhance the community surrounding a game."

Of course, it's no fun if this tumbling of conventions turns communities topsy-turvy. Most gamers (fortunately) pace themselves. "The interactions between humans in an online game are no different from any other type of online interaction," says director of community relations for Mythic Entertainment (*Dark Age of Camelot*, *Warhammer Online*) Sanya Thomas. "People get to know small facets of each other very quickly and very intensely, they form bonds over common causes and interests, and they get to form a relationship completely outside of normal societal pressures. And if you run out of things to talk about, you can switch between conversing and doing in-game activities." For Thomas, broadening online community interactivity involves balancing that tightrope interplay of social and emergent elements with realistic expectations. Too much too soon—and for too wide an audience—and you confuse the



► PVP players tend to be very competitive in *EverQuest II*.

► DEVELOPERS MUST ACCOMMODATE SEVERAL COMMUNITY 'IDEAS OF FUN.'

dynamio. "Advanced, community-driven activities are lovely in small groups of like-minded people who know each other well," she says. "I love them, but ask me again when the technology exists for large-scale populations. Community people tend to be very 'here and now' in their approach, and I'm no exception."

A BODY POLITIC

Literary theorist Stanley Fish often gets props for his conceptual notion of "interpretive communities," or the ways humans cluster together in cultural nodes to give shared purpose to our individual actions and social activities. Though what constitutes fun for one person may be very different from what's fun for another, chances are that both people belong to a community of like-adherents, be they for or against SUVs, doctor-assisted suicide, sushi, the war in Iraq, or the best way to camp for cash in *WOW*. In online communities, developers must accommodate several community "ideas of fun" without turning the games into messy, riotous free-for-alls.

With virtual worlds racking up planet-sized populations (present darling *World of Warcraft* is at 5 million plus and growing), how do you distill all that feedback? "We have various avenues for players to report issues or offer up ideas," responds Funcom's Morrison. "Our official boards have a suggestion forum; we monitor an e-mail address, and we also

have an in-game petition system that tracks and reports on the issues relayed in-game." This is fairly common, but Morrison says it's only half the process. "I'm also part of the *Anarchy Online* management team and sit in daily meetings with the project manager, game director, lead designer, and lead coder. Every day, we review the previous day's state reports from the in-game support team, and assess the status of the current development cycle. The beauty of having community involved during this stage is that concerns can be raised not just about existing content, but also what the reaction's going to be to proposed changes." Morrison acknowledges that the design team won't always agree with the community, but he points out that players just as often don't agree with each other.

Perhaps the next step toward enhancing community-developer relations is a sort of direct-democracy spin-off—say, online voting booths for feature mods and requests. "I think you'd have to be careful about what you put up for vote," cautions SOE's Crosby. "There are certain issues players are well versed in and could make informed decisions; however, there are many others about which they probably couldn't. If such a system were to exist, it would have to be open to all members of the community and not just those who play longer or smarter." Online lobbyists, PACs, and special-interest groups, anyone? / **Matt Peckham**



▲ In *Mythic's City of Villains*, players can create bases for private group meetings.

☑ OPEN-SOURCE MESSAGING?

It may sound bizarre to players and downright asinine to profit-driven publishers, but think about MMOs like member states of a gaming "nation." One way to broaden community interaction might be bridging game world "hard walls" by linking players in different franchises via cross-communication tools (if that's too wild for you, consider the fact that you can instant message using AIM or Yahoo! from half a dozen competitive platforms). "I don't

see an open standard happening for a long time," says Mythic's VP of product development, Matt Firor. "How do you share the revenue? Who's managing the technical issues?"

But Funcom's Morrison suggests integrating existing IM providers: "We've already seen the appearance of services like Xfire that track the games users are playing," he explains. "Working that into the game engines seems like a logical next step to me."

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HELL

You should've seen
how they decided on
the game's name.



WEEK

Ready to see how *Hellgate: London*'s development evolves?
CGW goes to work at Flagship Studios

EXCLUSIVE BEHIND THE SCENES

LIKE ANY OTHER GAME INDUSTRY "POWER MEETING," IT STARTS over a couple of beers: "Do you want to run a *Hellgate: London* cover story?" CGW gets the first exclusive, hands-on crack at multi-player, and the opportunity to break the news on the next class—the cabalist. Somewhere between pints one and four, though, the guys from Flagship Studios start anxiously checking their watches. Ummm, is it something we said? "Oh, no," says Flagship Studios CEO Bill Roper. "Today is play day, and I just want to get back!" For a second, he stops, chuckles, and rubs his hands together like a little kid. After about a minute, he checks his watch again. Bill Roper can't wait to play his own game.

At 3 p.m. every other Friday, work grinds to a halt at Flagship Studios.

With milestones met, a symphony of double-clicks rings through the halls as the *Hellgate* desktop shortcut ushers in chaos. Shouting, laughter, PC crashes. Every single person is a game tester for the afternoon—giving feedback, making design suggestions, and helping the upcoming action-RPG evolve. I wanted in.

This isn't some sugarcoated tour through the offices and a banal preview. For two days, I'd work side by side with the team behind a couple of little-known games you may have heard of: *Diablo* and *Diablo II*. What you're about to get is the inside perspective on what really goes into designing an ambitious, high-profile game. Oh, and we still have the hands-on multiplayer and cabalist scoops to get to—don't worry. /Darren Gladstone

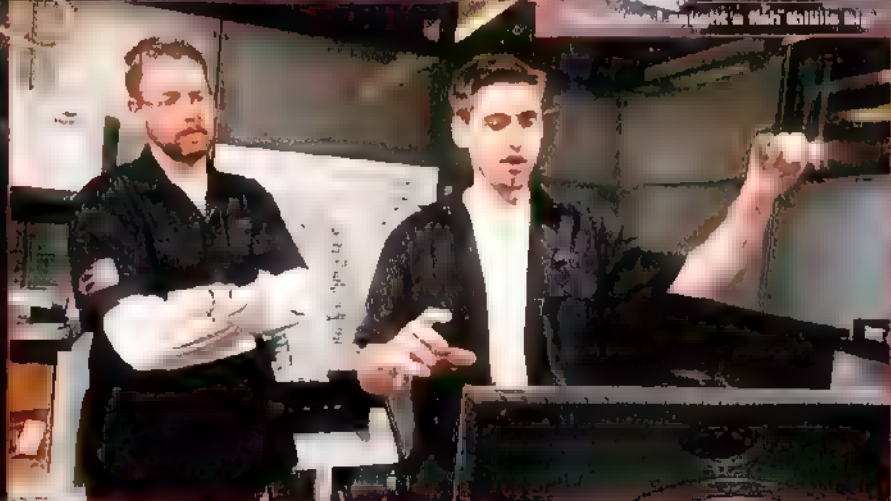
THURSDAY

FOR PETER HU (TECHNICAL DIRECTOR) AND DAVID BREVIK (chief visionary officer), it's crunch time. Both are set up on computers, isolated from each other in the conference room. It's better that way for the moment, because they have a long day and night ahead of them—tomorrow's the first big test for the multiplayer code.

"We've had multiplayer in for a month now," says Brevik. "But yesterday we dropped in a few major changes—namely, instancing. When you party in a hub area, it's not your own game hosted on Hellgate's servers. It's the broken quest and bug fixing. 'If you assume you're always in the same game, you're not instancing, which is the game on the fly, so you can't rely on everything being the same,' he adds. Since all the quest data is now being managed from being global (like a single-player game), the player being responsible in multiplayer, the programming team has to manually tweak quests.

Hu's big concern right now: particle effects. All the beams you shoot and special effects enrolling your gear slowly eat up CPU bandwidth. The average gaming computer can support 5,000 to 8,000 particles. If you hit that limit, say buh-bye to gameplay. "I don't know how good the performance will be if more than three people are playing in a group tomorrow," Hu warns. Maybe he's just cautious. It sure would be nice to see eight people playing in a group tomorrow, though. Unfortunately, they can't add more creatures to scale for multiplayer; they can definitely crank the monster A.I. up to 11.

Brevik interjects, "We're trying to do all this, plus still meet our milestone deadline. Basically, the programmers are not having a lot of fun right now." With that, it's probably best to let them work for a bit. Lee Dotson sits at a makeshift desk in what's supposed to be the office.



DAVID BREVIK
Chief visionary officer

Often mistaken for a young George Lucas, David Brevik was the chief brainiac behind *Diablo* and *Diablo II*. But here's something you didn't know: Brevik wanted *Diablo* to be turn based. And it was, until the team voted for real time, over Brevik's protests. But he converted it to real time...in one day.



lounge. From here, forever tempted by an Xbox 360 and a huge, working *Talko: Drum Master* arcade machine, Dotson designs the player models. Why does this 3D modeler have a stalker's gallery worth of pictures of actor Ken Watanabe on his desktop? He's trying to capture the essence of an Asian profile for one of the 12 body types you can choose from in the game. I'm assured that if the in-game character looks anything like Watanabe, it's strictly coincidental. "I looked at what *City of Heroes* did with character creation. We won't have that level of customizability, but we'll definitely offer more than *World of Warcraft*," he says. The plan is to let players adjust body types in proportion, alter the skin tone, and have different body modifications depending on sex (sorry, you can't make the ladies grow beards). If you change the character's class, slightly different physical attributes will be available.

"But I want the option to make my women bald," we both hear from the distance. Huh? That's chief creative officer Erich Schaefer talking to someone else near the kitchen. It's time to go into stealth mode and see where this conversation goes.

Instead of the notepad-equipped nite, Schaefer gets shadowed back to his desk.

WE'VE GOT BIG BALLS

"There need to be bigger, cooler balls in the game. They need to pop out as soon as you kill something and be easy to see," Schaefer says. The open-air office environment has four people now randomly throwing ideas back and forth at each

other: Erich; his brother, Max Schaefer (chief operation officer); Brevik; and art director Dave Glenn.

Max explains that right now they're all trying to figure out how to deal with potions. "It's been a 10-year struggle since we used them in *Diablo*. We want to avoid people hoarding potions and hammering the hotkey in battle." Suddenly, players get this huge influx of health and mana. How do you even that out? Right now, med packs are available for field use. Today, though, the team toys with power-ups—glowing colored balls in familiar red and blue. Fallen foes leave behind an essence that you can walk over to get a quick boost.

Erich strikes a pose with an invisible sword, sucking imaginary essence from the ether.

Brevik, meanwhile, laughs a little, saying, "We're just ripping the experience out of *Diablo* and *God of War*."

"As long as we don't have the guys stand around auto-regenerating health, I'm fine," says Erich. That would bring the action to a slow pace—exactly what they don't want.

"Well, we want to give them some health, but we want them to keep moving," Glenn adds.

"Maybe extra health packs?" They'll try dropping more packs and bigger, cooler balls tomorrow. Max wants to take the afternoon to work out the special effects around those balls. No doubt, you can expect him to lobby to keep them in the game. That's how it goes. One week, Max works at perfecting the HARP gun's muzzle fire and wants to call attention to it. Everyone tosses around suggestions and tweaks. A few new items or tweaks find

their way into the latest build for play day. If the idea works, it stays. If nobody notices a change, it might take a little tweaking or just get cut.

Conversation jumps again. Erich really wants some sort of "Identify" scroll or ability in the game. They did it in *Diablo* and intend to do it here because, really, the game revolves around one thing: loot. OK, loot and randomization, but we'll get to the latter soon enough. "In some respects, *Diablo* was like a slot machine," Erich says. "In the same way people wait for all those dinging sounds, people kept playing to find those rare, socketed relics." Is Erich looking to have people join Gamblers Anonymous for Hellgate? He laughs, replying, "They might need to...we think people will really dig the loot." Especially when it comes to modding your gear to look and feel different.

It is possible to get too much of a good thing? Brevik worries that players can screw with item drops. If enough people drop items in town areas, like Covent Garden station, it could potentially screw with the framerate. The possible long-term solution: allow players to only trade, sell, or just destroy inventory items.

"And don't forget that for tomorrow, everyone gets teleportation," Brevik reminds them. Like a Town Portal scroll in *Diablo*, this provides an express route home from an Instanced zone. "Just make a note to not call it a 'hearthstone.'" The guys laugh at the *WoW* reference. "Maybe a two-way love stone—" Brevik interrupts himself. "Ah, crap, you're going to put that in the article, aren't you?" Yep. >

PUBLISHER: Namco Hometek
 DEVELOPER: Flagship Studios
 GENRE: Action-RPG
 RELEASE DATE: "Ask again in two or six months."

WHAT IS HELLGATE: LONDON?

The *Cliffs Notes* version for lazy people

DIBLO AND ITS SEQUEL, *DIABLO II*, left a legacy that many tried to copy—building the next great action-RPG. The only remotely successful venture: ArenaNet's *Guild Wars* (not so ironically created by former Blizzard staffers who helped build battle.net). "But even *Guild Wars* is still missing one of the key things that kept people coming back: randomization," says CEO Bill Roper. "Back [when *Diablo* came out], it looked really simple to pull off...until you actually try and code random map generation into a game. It's some very complex stuff."

That randomization and the slot-machine-like loot gathering are the two notable hooks that keep gamers playing *Diablo II* even today. So is *Hellgate* just a new, first-person flavor of *Diablo*? According to Roper, "We've learned things from previous games, sure, but we're pushing all the sliders up for *Hellgate*." He points to the *Diablo II* expansion, *Lord of Destruction*, as an example. Random events occur in the world—such as people fighting—and you can stumble upon them.

The *Hellgate* team plans to offer many of those

random moments, so that when you go back to a hub area and meet up with friends, you all have very different experiences to report. Your first try at Covent Garden market might have you slogging through sewers, while the next might contain a mix of above and below ground content. Roper even mentioned that some of the random areas generated for *Hellgate* actually impressed the designers. But don't worry; the game won't be putting its creators out of a job just yet.

What about modders? No plans exist to make the game openly moddable—after all, the game is all about randomized levels. Still, Roper expects some to try. This leads to the inevitable question of cheaters. Will they need to enforce PunkBuster? It's too soon to talk much about the server-side plans. Considering the Battle.net heritage of Flagship's founders, we can only anticipate a free, well-structured service. It's also too soon to discuss how the game will deliver expanded content. All we know for now: Flagship is keeping its options open to both retail and digital delivery. **F**



Hellgate looks like it's from a demonic KFC.



The cabalist drops spells.

THE BREAKDOWN

THE STORY: Things got a little hot in modern-day England. Portals to hell broke open, unleashing demons and armies of the undead. Ah, but that was years ago. People now huddle in the London Underground with hopes of rallying and repelling evil. This just sets the groundwork for an even larger world. Now don't bank on this, but Roper jokes, "There could be a *Hellgate: Poughkeepsie!*"

THE GAMEPLAY: It's not too much of a stretch to imagine that this action-RPG might contain some *Diablo*-ish flair, with much hacking, slashing, shooting, spellcasting, and summoning to survive against hellish hordes. The three big operative "cool" parts are the deep loot system that lets you customize gear, the fully randomized levels so that you never play the game the same way twice, and multiplayer.

THE TEMPLAR

THE CABALIST

WITH THE HELLGATE OPENING CAME the first line of defense: the templars. These descendants of the Knights

Templar secret society anticipated this impending evil for ages. Brute force and prayer make these holy fighters heavily armed, walking tanks in combat.

HACK-N-SLASH

While templars can handle most small arms and dual-wield weapons in either hand, they remain most comfortable with swords. Originally, the game plan featured the option to swing swords in first person. Not anymore. While you can use the mouse wheel to pull the camera in or out, swordplay happens only in third person.

PRAISE THE LORD

Divinity powers amp up a templar's combat prowess. Attack faster, jump higher—be a God-fueled Neo.

CRUSADER

Area-effect auras can mass with evil minds and bodies. Repel or destroy attackers en masse with these holy moves.

DEFENDER

The best offense is a good defense. Some skills improve your armor or increase your health.

THE CABALIST, QUITE SIMPLY, IS

twisted. She combines many talents: proficiency in the dark arts, demonology, and even a little bit of a mad science. Creating mutated pets and nightmarish weapons is her stock-in-trade. When the Hellrifts began opening, it awakened latent abilities in those with inquisitive minds. Students of the arcane, scientists...it didn't matter. All of a sudden, they were able to create items straight out of their imaginations.

BOTH

With their overdeveloped noggins, cabalists aren't as good at taking a punch as templars are. Just don't think them total pushovers. They tend to wear organic threads, their duds juiced with runes, magic, and even demon pieces. Do the clothes make the monster? Think H.R. Giger meets Marilyn Manson. Très chic!

SUMMONING

Can you start seeing the necromancer's heritage in the Cabalist yet? You will once you start summoning allies to do your bidding. Carnagors, a personal favorite around the office, look like the bastard results of a shark in a mating frenzy with a pit-bull. The shrieker is your basic bat out of hell; the fire elemental is, well, fire support; and the spectral lure is a demonic Roach Motel, luring enemies to their death.

SPELLING TROUBLE

Most of the cabalist's projectile spells require a focus object. For those who remember the psi-orbs in *System Shock 2*, it's the same concept here. In fact, for our demos, we needed to find blue crystal balls of doom to get the job done. Cast bolts and energy whips, or just make your enemy explode like a satanic piñata. Fun for the whole family!

TRANSFORMERS

These abilities aren't in the game yet, nor are the powers finalized. But the cabalist is able to take on demonic attributes. Improved melee combat merely scratches the evil surface. Imagine growing armor, a demonic claw, or some fiend's missile weapon.



A big pile of meat and bone is a bees. Yay!



A QUICK SPLIT-PERSONALITY LOOK AT THE TWO CLASSES ANNOUNCED FOR HELLGATE: LONDON.

HELL-FIRED

MAD SKILLS

When we first saw the game a year ago, the initial skill tree looked like a hexagonal map. In that time, other revisions came and went. Today: nothing—just a sampling of skills to choose from for the sake of taste. It just goes to show that as far as *Hellgate* is coming along, a good deal of the background remains in flux.

As for the skills themselves, expect 90 skills per character class, split evenly among their three disciplines. No big surprise that with experience, you earn points that you can allocate toward improving abilities. Unlike the *Diablo* games, *Hellgate* lacks skill caps. Keep leveling up and you can keep upgrading those powers for as long as you like.

THIRD CLASS?

No secret here: *Hellgate* has more people coming to the party than just templars and cabalists—but how many, and will they be in the first installment or later expansions? All great questions. After enquiring around the office for a couple days and playing the game, we've got some thoughts, speculations, and suggestions of our own.

Templars make up your warrior caste—your melee men. Cabalists fill the spellcaster role. Seems straightforward enough, right?

Following the logic of the original *Diablo*-busting crew, all it lacks now is a ranged combat class (In *Diablo*, the rogue was a regular William Tell). I'd also put money on a heavy-weapons specialist. A gunsmith. A hunter. Clue number two: Most of the weapons seen in the game thus far consist of melee or small arms—pistols, handheld flamethrowers, and the like. Maybe Flagship's saving the big guns (yes, that pun was intended) for the final class reveal.

Again—just speculation on my part. However, if I were to make a gun-toting demon hunter, the game dynamics for it exist. The templar game mainly features third-person sword swinging. The cabalist's controls feel more like "my first FPS" when slinging spells—a sticky target aids the player in hitting the closest enemy. If a gunner class does pop up, Flagship could make it perform more like a traditional, adrenaline-fueled FPS with no aided targeting. This way, not only do you have a randomized game with lots of loot, but you also happen to have a game that caters to three completely different styles of gameplay.



WEAPONS OF DESTRUCTION

Searcher > Cute little handheld flamethrowers. Perfect for s'mores.

Cluster Rifle > Time for the demons to see the light.

Fire Starter > Y'know those starters you use on your BBQ? Same concept.

Zeus Rifle > Chain lightning—great for demon slaying and jump-starting cars.



BILL ROOPER

CEO

Yeah, yeah—everyone knows trivia like he is the grunt voice ("Zug-zug!") in *WarCraft* and that he's practically worshipped in South Korea because of *StarCraft*. Did you know, though, that when he isn't globe-trotting, he's also a singer in a band of inebriated ne'er-do-wells? Check out poxyboggards.com.

FRIDAY

E PLAY DAY! A BANK OF COMPUTERS awaits Team CGW in the conference room. Also on hand for the festivities: CGW editor-in-chief Jeff Green and 1UP.com's Matt Leone. We didn't expect to see all of Flagship Studios hovering nearby, but they're just as excited to see the latest content update. Still, it's a little

intimidating having 31 people see how much you suck...but hey, it quickly becomes a communal experience.

While making a female midget cabalist named HlimJeffGreen, Jeff discovers the bald option.

"Hey, Erich! Congrats! You got your bald girl."

Typically, after starting, we go our own separate ways for a solo mission. I can tell you right now that the cabalist has a very different feel from the templar.

Unlike the templar's third-person hack-n-slash gameplay, it almost feels slower and a little more methodical here with all the weapons, magic bolts, and creature wrangling.

Spectral bolts dance from my blue orb, knocking the torso off a zombie...but the legs still shamble after me. "Whoa! You see that?" A few more bolts knock a zombie skyward. Then, using a HARP rifle, the zombie catches a shot and explodes in midair. It feels a little arcadey, but no complaints there. Routing a couple more zombies, I'm glowing—the Pavlovian reward of leveling up! Spells, shmells: I want to summon a carnager. The carny's A.I., sadly, isn't up to snuff. While it will attack my enemies, it also finds itself trapped in a corner.

As I'm fine-tuning my character and picking talents, Max Schaefer comes over and asks what I think of individually tweaking stats like Intelligence and such. Personally, I'm fine with how BioWare pulled it off in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. There, you had the option to juggle numbers or just trust the class-specific defaults (which were often right on).

IN FORMATION

Time to circle up with the troops. Back at Covent Garden, we compare notes and band together. Jeff's adventure took him deeper into the underground line. Matt was on street level, and (in typical fashion) I was in the sewers. While only the three of us are joining forces, some of the other Flagship guys log in around the office. They assemble a posse eight players strong, and the game still remains stable.

The biggest compliment we can give: The



ERICH AND MAX SCHAEFER

Chief creative officer & chief operation officer

Erich and Max are brothers. How can you tell? They live in the same building. They commute together. They both have two dogs. They both love single-malt scotch (blended is crap). They haven't killed each other yet. Still, we totally understand the frequently brutal, physical and emotional fights.

multiplayer feels like the single-player game, just with more people. We all continue exploring on a shared mission, and *Hellgate* feels just as manageable as when flying solo.

Walking through the station we start to notice all the little things we missed when playing alone. We come across goofy posters for *Trainspotting 2* starring zombies. We literally trip over a micro-sized templar put in current builds of the game as a joke. They call him "Li'l Joey." For the moment, it's fun taking a mission from a fully armored man who's only knee-high. Presumably to be replaced by a little kid, Joey is missing his prosthetic leg and needs it back. Of course, we're obliged to help the runt.

Heading above ground, we encounter a pack of maggots and roving gangs of Hellmeat. What's Hellmeat? Oh, just your average, everyday, infernal plucked chicken carcass that wants to separate your white meat from your dark meat. After sending them back to whatever 11 herbs and satanic spices birthed them, we recover the fake limb and return it. Then the game crashes.

If *Hellgate* shipped tomorrow, we'd be worried, but that's far from the case. The entire office continues to hammer the hell out of the code—and to anxiously wait for another chance to play.

MORE BEHIND-THE-SCENES HIGH JINKS ONLINE

Print isn't dead; it just has a younger, hipper, interactive son that doesn't listen to us anymore. We pulled aside some key team members from Flagship and got them to talk about all sorts of wacky things on camera. What's it like to meet Peter Jackson? The answer from Bill Roper, direct footage from the game, and a whole lot more await you right now at 1UP.com.





ISSUE 262

VIEWPOINT

AN INFORMED
LOOK AT THE
GAMES YOU
SHOULD BE
PLAYING



PARDON OUR DUST

- 1 **1UP.com servers as our jumping-off point for longer, deeper reviews**
- 2 **No more scores.** Those of you who want your Cliff's Notes still get now they compare with what we say.
- 3
- 4

3

4

than a review!

Questions? Comments? Death threats?
Hit us up at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com and
tell us what you think of the changes

REVIEW PHILOSOPHY



CGW's reviews don't concern themselves with scored evaluations; you can find those at 1UP.com well before the magazine arrives in print. Instead, we offer something different: in-depth opinion features that dig deeper into the PC games you're playing via the discussion of relevant topics, including fan reaction, press reception, internet buzz, and postrelease gameplay evolution. Sure, you can find plenty of reviews and aggregate scores online—but in CGW, you get the big picture. And yes, great games continue to receive Editors' Choice status.

INSIDE



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4X

X3: Reunion

No, not the gonna-be-crap X-Men sequel.



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LOL

Crisis on Infinite Servers

One man's monthly MMORPG adventures.



92

WAR

Tom vs. Bruce

Music and blasters and old Jedi masters.



VEGAS RUINED, TOO?

Ubisoft recently announced *Rainbow Six: Vegas*...and it's another version loading on consoles. That doesn't bode well for long-term R6 fans.

RAINBOW SIX:

The fall of a mighty franchise

FANS AND CRITICS EXPRESSED MIXED reactions to *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*. Review scores were all over the place, and fan reaction ranged from determined (and perhaps somewhat desperate) Clancyverse fanboyism to profound disappointment. Despite a few bizarre—perhaps overly forgiving—anomalous reviews, the overwhelming sense is that *Lockdown* represents a franchise well and truly ruined. No longer carving a unique path and influencing an entire generation of modern warfare games, *Rainbow Six* now amounts to little more than a very pretty-looking slice of mediocrity. We wanted to give it the benefit of the doubt and somehow find a glimmer of hope among its linear levels and console-style gameplay, but, in the end, we had to concede defeat.

When we posted our review on 1UP.com on *Lockdown*'s launch date, reviewer Di Luo gave

it a surprisingly low four out of 10, commenting, "Tactical shooter fans know the *Rainbow Six* series for its 'brainier' sort of gameplay. Previous games feature detailed mission planning, an unforgiving damage model, and a reliance on stealth and finesse over brute force. But for whatever the reason, with *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*, developer Red Storm Entertainment threw it all away." Perhaps this is indicative of the franchise's shift away from its PC roots and toward its new, joyypad-driven goals. Gone are the days of setting waypoints on the map and planning out your mission in detail before even setting foot in the first-person mode—and we can all blame the console versions for that.

GameSpy repeated this sentiment, awarding *Lockdown* an equally low score (two out of five) and summarizing, "*Lockdown* doesn't feel at all like a *Rainbow Six* game. It's just another

generic 'special forces versus terrorists' shooter." We couldn't agree more. The R6 games once required such care and precision that you'd agonize over peeping around a corner or even breaching a door. Where did that go?

Yahoo! Games (and CGW) contributor Tom Chick joined the 40 percent club as well, stating, "The level design is relentlessly linear, using fake doors, pointless long hallways, and contrived obstacles to pull you from one end to the other," before concluding: "It's another throwaway shooter with bad A.I., forgettable single-player levels, and glib, unremarkable multiplayer options."

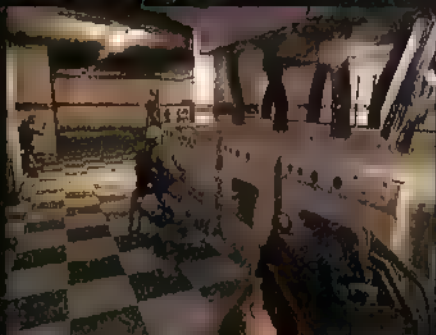
NIGHT-LIGHT

It isn't all completely bad news on the reviews front, though: IGN took a gentler approach to criticizing *Lockdown*'s woes, commenting, "Although [*Lockdown*] doesn't suffer audiovisually from having console roots, its gamepad-oriented gameplay keeps it from rising to the occasion." A comment toward the end of IGN's review very ably summarized a lot of the community feedback toward the game, too: "Unfortunately, it feels like an early version of

ALREADY, IT SEEMS THAT LOCKDOWN MAY GET CUT SHORT TO MAKE WAY FOR ITS SUCCESSOR.



▲ Why bother with the tactics, guys? They do you no good in this game.



▲ "Lemme just grab my Kevlar vest out of the wash real quick..."

LOCKDOWN

Counter-Strike. Not such a bad thing...if the game had come out two or three years ago.

Most surprising on the professional reviews front is GameSpot's score of eight out of 10, with the single-word summary, "Great." Considering everything else written during the week of *Lockdown's* release, this score claims near single-handed responsibility for lifting the game into the 50 percent range on review aggregate sites like GameTab and Game Rankings. GameSpot's review took a different approach when it came to *Lockdown's* multiplayer gameplay, singling out the co-op missions for praise. "The true highlight of *Lockdown's* multiplayer action, though, is cooperative play," it stated. "You can play cooperatively with up to four players on LAN or online over Ubl.com. There are two game types: Mission mode lets you play out the 16 single-player missions with friends complete with objectives, while Terrorist Hunt lets you simply take out a bunch of A.I.-controlled bad guys on any of the maps. The co-op action is pretty fun, and the ability for players to respawn if they're killed keeps the frustration level down if one of the players just isn't very



Whatcha gonna do when they come for you?

skilled." We had quite a different experience with multiplayer, and while we agree that the respawning keeps things arcadey, the dumb A.I. more than outweighs this, provoking frequent exclamations of "WTF?" whenever we play. Elsewhere, GameSpot also had a different approach to *Lockdown*'s jarring change of style: "[It's] more tactical than the console versions and definitely a lot of fun...but it's still got a noticeable arcade flavor."

This "flavor" made for one of *Lockdown*'s most-commented-upon aspects throughout the *Rainbow Six* community. In our own backyard, 1UP.com user AzN.Homeboy ably summarized user response: "What were they thinking? I've played every PC *Rainbow Six* game since they came out. I hated the console versions, which were watered-down, linear shooting galleries. Now they take that formula and bring it back to the PC, and they think that the crowd who fell in love with the series because of its tactical roots will enjoy it? Nope." Message boards across the Internet echoed this sentiment.

OUTCRY

Ubisoft's official forums played host to some very specific concerns about the game. Far from being a congregation of like-minded *Rainbow Six* fans, as you might (quite justifiably) expect, the forums contained a laundry list of issues shared by the vast majority of those playing the game extensively. Chief among these: the overly fast running speed of the player, and a lack of dedicated server support for online multiplayer and associated server admin support. When we tackled Ubisoft on the subject, a spokesperson told us, "Ubisoft and Red Storm are currently working with community and technical support to investigate the technical issues that the game has and determining how widespread they are." When we pushed the company to confirm or deny an upcoming patch, we got a very official-sounding response: "If a patch is [necessary], it is the technical issues that will be fixed." Our take on this? The server problems may very well find a fix...but not many (if any) of the gameplay quibbles.

With regard to other complaints, we pressed Ubisoft on the change of gameplay focus and its implications for future games in the franchise. A number of fans on the message boards expressed worries that *Lockdown* may imply a change of direction for the upcoming *Rainbow Six: Vegas*. Why the shift away from the tactical gameplay? "We believe that *Lockdown* PC has a high degree of tactical behavior if a gamer chooses to play that way," Ubisoft's spokesperson says, a little defensively. "Using team commands and vision modes, the gamer can enhance the tactical experience." Translation: If you want to pretend that the game offers something that it doesn't, go right ahead. "Ubisoft takes feedback on forums and from customer service very seriously," the spokesperson continues. "But it's important to remember that the feedback on *Lockdown* PC in both places has not all been negative. It is also important to note that there are many gamers playing *Lockdown* PC currently that enjoy it and are not active in the many different

Rainbow Six communities and forums."

One the subject of the series' next installment, Ubisoft's spokesperson says: "*Rainbow Six: Vegas* has been in development for more than a year, with major design elements already chosen prior to the release of *Lockdown*. However, we will always use feedback from our fans when designing and creating a game. We not only take feedback from fans of a specific franchise when making games, but will look at feedback from our other franchises, such as *Ghost Recon* and *Splinter Cell*. We determine what has worked well and what hasn't, and how we can implement different ideas to make the best games possible. Ubisoft believes that *Rainbow Six: Vegas* will reinvent the franchise on the console by bringing it to the next generation. We are confident that our next *Rainbow Six* PC product will do the same."

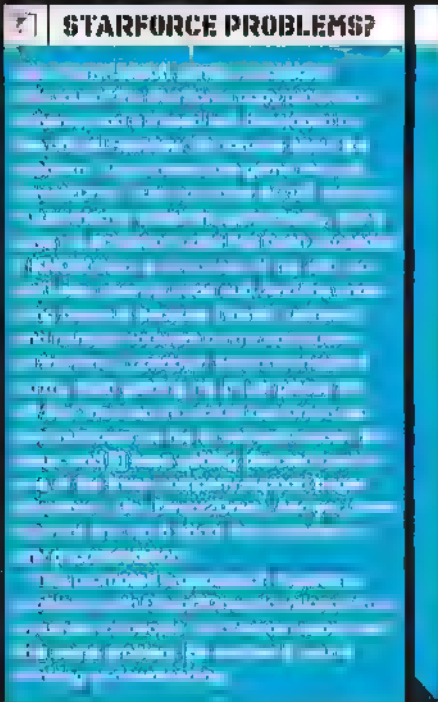
Previous *Rainbow Six* games received multiple patches to enhance their longevity and shape the product to the whims of the community, but, already, it seems that *Lockdown* may be cut short to make way for its successor. Fan reaction is nowhere near as supportive as that for *Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear* or other previous games in the franchise, and a lot of this seems due to *Lockdown*'s console roots. The patch may well come soon—but for PC *Clancy* fans, it will more than likely be too little, too late. / John Davison



▲ What reason does he have for hiding? Our guess: livid shame.



▲ BLAM! BLAM! "Hey, wait! We just wanna ask you some questions!" BLAM! BLAM!



COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT

Pedestrian multiplayer, bad A.I., and missing features. The downfall of a once-mighty franchise.

FALLING PIECES

OUR FAVORITE
WAYS TO WASTE
SPARE TIME

CASUAL CENTRAL

Looking for a good casual game to play? We recommend heading over to PopCap Games at www.popcap.com.

WEIRD WORLD

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN ALIENS abduct your dog? Go after him, of course. That's the basic premise behind *Samorost 2*, a Flash-driven adventure with a slant on personality and imagination (and great ambient music).

Samorost 2 takes place in a universe of tiny, living planetoids, each embellished with intricately snaking roots, gourd-shaped oavems, and boxy machinery. Think of a Yee Aum cover by way of Edward Gorey, and you'll have a rough approximation of the game's unique look. The environments contain outstanding levels of detail, with interactive objects existing solely for their own sake and the sort of near-tangible textures you'd find in a *Myst* game. The *Myst* analogy doesn't end there, as you find yourself manipulating gears and machinery to solve many of *Samorost 2*'s puzzles—but they're rarely as archly baroque as in *Myst* (one puzzle in *Samorost 2* hinges on the task of drawing a *Myst* into a puddle of opossum vomit). The first half of *Samorost 2* comes free, but the full game costs \$6.90. Check it out at www.samorost2.net.

JINKIES, SCOOBY!

Next up: *Mystery Case Files: Huntaville*. What initially sounds like another adventure game is actually an exercise in obsessive-compulsive behavior. Remember those "find the hidden objects" puzzles that delighted you so at age 3 in *Highlights* magazine? This puzzler ups the ante...a lot. At first, locating the "clues" scattered about the insanely cluttered locales in the game isn't so tough, but once you get past the first few levels, the increasingly numerous objects become exceptionally well hidden, even in plain sight. Add a frantic end-of-level jigsaw puzzle to solve with whatever time's left on the ticking clock, and you have an eye-straining, yet oddly addictive, game. Wander over to www.greenapples.com for a free trial—the full license runs just \$20.

—Robert Coffey



When he's not spewing hate-filled editorial, CGW alum Robert Coffey spends plenty of free time playing *Bejeweled 2*.



▲ Get a sharp eye? P



▲ *Samorost 2* is sorta like a low-rent *Myst*.



▲ Where's Waldo? meets Sherlock Holmes.

ONE OF THE TOP FIVE GAME-DEGREE PROGRAMS

—Electronic Gaming Monthly

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Philippines-based artist Van Caberto provided all of Bonnie's art, and you can see more at www.caberto.com. Most of it isn't this caddy.

BONNIE'S BOO

Just like the olden days

ONCE UPON A TIME, PHIL STEINMEYER owned and ran PopTop Software, his very own game development company. The good people of PopTop created "gamers' games" like *Tropica* and *Railroad Tycoon 3*—hardcore strategy games that, while they might have been graced with a touch of whimsy here and there, revolved around painstaking micromanagement, detailed 3D graphics, rich soundtracks, and the sort of complexity the hardcore gaming public demanded. And then, after seven years of living a gaming geek's dream life, Steinmeyer walked away from PopTop...to make the sorts of games your mom plays.

THE PRINCESS AND THE P

Steinmeyer's latest game—and the first game to bear the logo of New Crayon, his new, (almost) one-man-band game operation—is a classic word puzzler. *Bonnie's Bookstore* introduces the barest of narratives to a tried-and-true vocabulary challenge as it details the story of Bonnie, a young woman who inherits a bookstore and begins writing children's stories to accompany the paintings

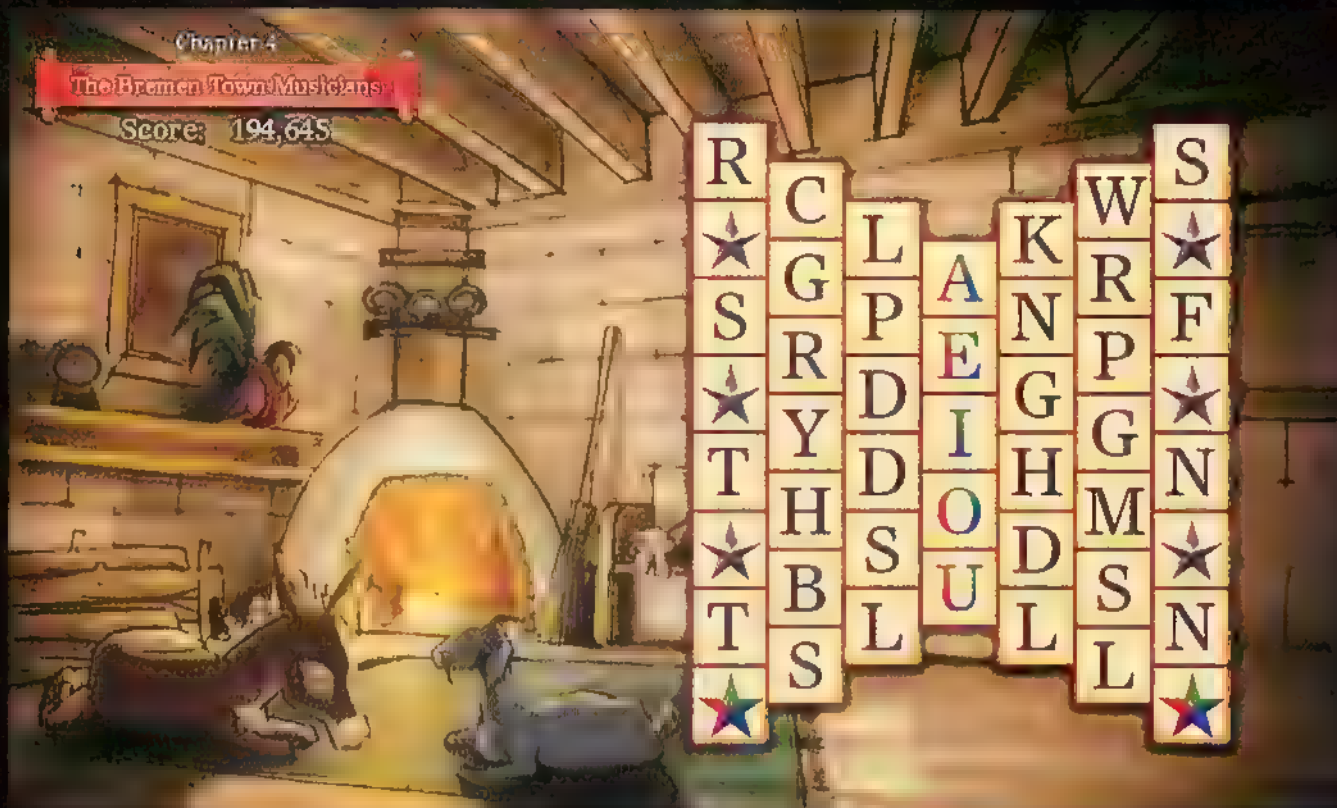
she discovers in the store's attic. Granted, you're not exactly playing through *Anna Karenina* here, but the plot makes a great excuse to toss some nice background art on the screen as you struggle to carve out strings of words in one of two different playing modes. Compare it to the visually sparse *Bookworm* (also distributed by PopCap; see the sidebar on pg. 86 for more on those guys) or Yahoo's brutally minimal *Text Twist*, and you could practically call *Bonnie's Bookstore* a multi-colored extravaganza—which makes it easier to play for long hours of happily wasted time.

Still, *Bonnie's* descends from these games—but in ways a lot less obvious than the gameplay fundamentals. "I think I started out as hardcore as anybody else," Steinmeyer says. "But over time, I lost patience with overly complex games that didn't seem to offer a lot of reward for the two to four hours it takes to really learn them and get into them." Nowadays, while Steinmeyer still plays games around six to eight hours a week, he's mostly playing casual or simple online games (like *Ticket to Ride*), occasionally digging out a more complex golden oldie like *SimCity*.

THE PRINCE AND THE PAUPER

Steinmeyer had a steep learning curve when making the switch from hardcore to casual games. Things that he'd learned developing hardcore games since 1993 were actually obstacles in the casual market; where the ability to customize makes a great selling point for a hardcore game, it's just confusing in a casual game. Levels in a casual game need to last about three minutes—a far cry from the hours a *Railroad Tycoon 3* scenario might last. Not surprisingly, technical issues present a huge hurdle, too: Instead of fitting on two CDs, your game needs to be a tidy 10MB downloadable file, and you need to target machines that might still be running Windows 98 and aren't packed with the latest processing hardware.

Other than that, according to Steinmeyer, you're pretty much free to do what you want. "The casual market is still very wide open toward gameplay innovation," he says. "Your game has to be fun, because all the sales are 'try before you buy,' and if you have a concept that's not fun, people will try but not buy." This argument holds a fair amount of truth. Take a look at the top 10 best-selling PC



That single line of vowels is all you get on this late-game level. Earning wild cards here is crucial.

KSTORE

games of 2006, according to the NPD Group:

1. *World of Warcraft* (Vivendi Universal)
2. *The Sims 2: University* (Electronic Arts)
3. *The Sims 2* (Electronic Arts)
4. *Guild Wars* (NGsoft)
5. *RollerCoaster Tycoon 3* (Atari)
6. *Battlefield 2* (Electronic Arts)
7. *The Sims 2: Nightlife* (Electronic Arts)
8. *Age of Empires III* (Microsoft)
9. *The Sims Deluxe Edition* (Electronic Arts)
10. *Call of Duty 2* (Activision)

Seven of these are sequels, one is based on an existing franchise, one is more than five years old, and only one is a truly new title. Compare that with the top 10 casual games from RealArcade (based on number of weeks in RealArcade's top 10 list):

1. *Bejeweled 2 Deluxe*
2. *Diner Dash*

3. *Luxor*
4. *Aloha Solitaire*
5. *Mah Jong Quest*
6. *Twinklebugs*
7. *Big Kahuna Reef*
8. *Magic Ball 2*
9. *Zuma Deluxe*
10. *Wheel of Fortune*

Only one game on this list, in 10th place, is an outside licensee. Now, you tell me: Which one of these lists is stuck in a rut?

To Steinmeyer, the answer is obvious: "In casual games, there's a fresh genre every year. This past year, it was *Diner Dash*; in 2004, *Zuma*, and maybe *Feeding Frenzy*; in 2003, *Collapse*, *Magic Inlay*, and *Bookworm*; in 2002, *Rebound* brought back the *Arkanoid* genre after a 16-year absence. The last new 'core' PC genre is probably the MMORPG, and before that, maybe the



Longer words in timed mode earn extra seconds to finish the level.



TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

Part of the legend of legendary game designer and developer John Carmack is that he's a bit of a prankster. He's known for pulling off some of the most impressive stunts in the industry, like convincing his team to build a game that would be a huge success. Carmack's pranks are often subtle, but they're always there. He's a man who knows how to have fun, and he's not afraid to share that fun with his team. He's a man who knows how to work, and he's not afraid to show it. He's a man who knows how to lead, and he's not afraid to follow. He's a man who knows how to win, and he's not afraid to lose. He's a man who knows how to play, and he's not afraid to stop. He's a man who knows how to live, and he's not afraid to die. He's a man who knows how to love, and he's not afraid to hate. He's a man who knows how to be, and he's not afraid to be. He's a man who knows how to be, and he's not afraid to be.

LEVELS IN A CASUAL GAME NEED TO LAST ABOUT THREE MINUTES



Even the tutorial in *Railroad Tycoon 3* presents more complications than anything in *Bonnie's*.

RTS back in 1995? Two new genres in 10 years.

Bonnie's Bookstore stacks up quite well in the innovation department, but in an iterative context: The game's "find the words in the jumble of letters" concept comes straight out of *Bookworm*, as do both the timed and untimed modes. Still, *Bonnie's* contains enough new features to make it feel fresh and original. Three difficulty modes set up an artificial timer of sorts in the normal game; while you have no ticking clock to beat, the number of turns you're allotted to clear the board shrinks as you climb toward higher levels. The timed game? That's got your ticking clock. As the game progresses, the board layout presents a variety of challenges by isolating difficult letters like X or limiting you to just a single line of vowels. Wild card tiles play a vital role in winning and racking up big scores...and while the game sometimes starts a level with them, wild cards actually fall under your control, since you can earn them by building longer words. It all adds up to a consistently rewarding game, especially in that "high-five your IQ" way that word puzzlers pay off when you create big words. You can still whip through the game pretty quickly—while *Bonnie's* tracks high scores, the drive to rack up bigger ones just isn't there like it is in *Bookworm*. Once you

reach the end, the game definitely feels over.

LIVING HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Then again, casual gaming is about smaller rewards, anyway. For Steinmeyer, it means he can work at home, see his kids every day, and focus on gameplay over graphics. Plus, he's able to have a playable version of his game up and running in two months (while *Bonnie's Bookstore* was developed in just over six months, its beta lasted longer than any previous game Steinmeyer had worked on). The financial rewards aren't the greatest...but then, with hardcore PC gaming targeting an increasingly elite player base (a base that can handle the technical, financial, and gameplay demands), and with casual gaming always adding new gamers—particularly women—to the audience, maybe that fat paycheck isn't all that far-fetched. Or far off.

—Robert Coffey



VERDICT

The biggest knock against this addictive word game: It's over too soon. If only it had as many levels as *Big Kahuna Reef*...

Culliver's Travels Chapter 2

"Excuse me," said Culliver to his tiny captors, "but I've got this terrible itch."



Click to go



▶ Bonnie typing. Yes, it's as exciting as it sounds.



POPCAPI

You've whiled away countless hours of your life playing *Bejeweled*, *Zuma Deluxe*, and *Bookworm*...so who do you blame for all that lost productivity (and all that entertainment)? Blame these guys: John Vechey, Brian Fiete, and Jason Kapaka. Classmates at Indiana's Purdue University, Vechey and Fiete dropped out and created a multiplayer capture-the-flag game called *Arc*. This grabbed the attention of Kapaka, who was a producer at Total Entertainment Network (which later became Pogo) at the time. After an initial meeting, the three kept in touch, and in 2000, they formed Sexy Action Cool, attempting to market strip-poker software to adult websites. Not such a great idea.

Their next, better idea was to license simple Web games to portal sites like Microsoft's Gaming Zone and Kapaka's former employer, Pogo. Their first game, *Bejeweled*, was an unqualified hit—but the site offering it hit hard times. So the trio renamed their company PopCap, upgraded *Bejeweled*'s graphics, sounds, and game modes, and gambled that consumers would pay for a better version of a game they had heretofore played for free. The rest is history: a stable of insidiously addictive games, something akin to star status in the casual gaming market, and even induction into CGW's Hall of Fame (*Bejeweled*, CGW #251). Asked to explain their success, former CGW freelancer and current PopCap creative director Jason Kapaka simply says, "People don't really want a challenge; they just want to relax." Right. Like we'd ever care anything about a late-stage timed-mode bout of *Bookworm* "relaxing."

BY THE NUMBERS

Casual game vs. core game

NAME	BONNIE'S BOOKSTORE	RAILROAD TYCOON 3
Development time	6.5 months	2 years, 3 months
Team size	3 (single-person internal team, 1 artist, 1 contract musician hired for a month)	27, not counting external musicians (15-person internal team, 5 programmers, 7 artists)
Time invested	1 man-year	25-30 man-years
Hard drive space required	13MB	1.01GB
Number of CDs	0	2
Manual length (in pages)	0	57
In-game tutorial text	143 words	2,374 words
Number of professional reviews within first two months of game's release	Approximately 3	Approximately 25
Ad pages in CGW	0	2
Hours Steinmeyer's wife spent playing it	More than 40	.25 (15 minutes)

LINE OF ATTACK

VIEWPOINT

WAR-BLOGGER!

Check out columnist Bruce Geryk's war-gaming blog at grognaards.TUP.com.

YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO
HARDCORE
WAR-GAMING

PORT-O-PUERTO RICO

WHILE AVALON HILL'S *DIPLOMACY* is the game many grognards think of when it comes to screwing over their neighbors, *Puerto Rico* arguably promotes said act to an even higher level of importance. Its reign atop the rankings at www.boardgamegeek.com (the online b.b.le for board game fans) reflects its unique style of gameplay: It's all about opponents, rather than yourself. Simple, yet relentless, mechanics drive the game, almost completely excluding random elements and encouraging players to frequently make decisions based not on what helps them, but what hurts everyone else.

Games like *Puerto Rico* work best when you can see your opponents face-to-face, but Eagle Games (www.eaglegames.net) recently published a PC version developed by Polish studio Reactor. This port faithfully re-creates *Puerto Rico*'s theme of developing plantations and shipping goods such as indigo, sugar, coffee, and tobacco to the Old World. As board game conversions go, it emulates the mechanics well...but somehow doesn't quite manage to capture the same charm. Perhaps it's the fact that you can see the full position of only one opponent at a time, which leads to a lot of clicking. Maybe it's the mechanical way the turns fly by. Or maybe it's just that *Puerto Rico* doesn't translate that well to the PC.

Although not bad by any means, the game feels flat. And while the A.I. generally remains good overall, it falls prey far too easily to the "corn farm" strategy: simply produce all the corn you can and ship it for



Backstab your opponents to get ahead.



Harvest valuable resources from plantations.

victory points. Fortunately, the game supports multiplayer, but so does the free version at www.brettspielwelt.info (the English version of a popular German online board game service). Ultimately, the best version of *Puerto Rico* is the one made out of cardboard.

/Bruce Geryk



Longtime CGW contributor Bruce Geryk can probably kick your ass at any board game, any day of the week.



Puerto Rico supports anywhere from three to five players.

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X3: REUNION

Almost the space sim it should've been

SOMEWHERE METADIMENSIONAL LIES a dreamland where critter-ridden, pointy-headed software travels after critics like us oall it out and forum-patrolling purists raise the white hankie. Call it hardcore-software heaven: a quixotic design where all's forgiven and developer noblesse gets its just deserts. (Derek Smart has advance tickets for everything he will release between now and the end of time.) Occasionally, one of these tragic tin gods turns away from the light and slips back to...let's call it a "purgatorial" existence, a chance to make amends by patching itself up to par.

Case in point: You can't really accuse X3: *Reunion* developer Egosoft of gunning for the easy sale, even with publisher Enlight's pushy 2005 holiday release. While publishers are low-

balling simpler and shorter games (the better to lure us in for alternate seconds and thirds), space-sim X3 harks back to a time when decoding the interface was considered part of the fun. So here's a bit of insider info: To paraphrase film critic Roger Ebert, I hated, hated, hated having to slam X3 in my original look at the prepatch retail version (see *CGW* #259 for the gory details). Did it deserve the flak? Unquestionably. The retail release was prone to crash, dog-slow, buggier than an episode of *Fear Factor*, and topped off with a cryptologist-buffaloing interface.

Still, I desperately wanted to love X3 the way Mindy wants to love Mork. It's the sort of gargantuan, give-em-hell game that often gets relegated to low-budget indie houses or fluke developers like Bethesda. It's also wildly popu-

lar as far as message boards go, with nearly 600,000 posts on Egosoft's forums and roughly 180,000 registered users at last count. You have to hand it to the German developer for paying more than lip service to that kind of fan base. Three patches on, something nigh-miraculous occurred: With doubled performance and many of the mission-busting bugs nixed, X3 evolved from a Byzantine hodgepodge to an actually accessible, massively multiform space sim. The bottom line: It's back on my hard drive, this time to stay.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

What changed? Frankly, a bit of everything. Let's start with the biggie: performance. For all our bluster about gameplay trumping graphics and framerate, it's asking a lot for gamers to enjoy something that jerks like a slide-show projector. And even at low detail, retail X3 ran like molasses through an hourglass. Version 1.3 still wants a powerful rig, but my framerate nearly doubled in the notoriously traffic-crazy

THE BOTTOM LINE: X3'S BACK ON MY HARD DRIVE. THIS TIME TO STAY.

BETA MEANS BETTER?

Don't just grab the v1.3 patch, hit the official forums and download the v1.3.2 beta for finish-line-quality improvements.

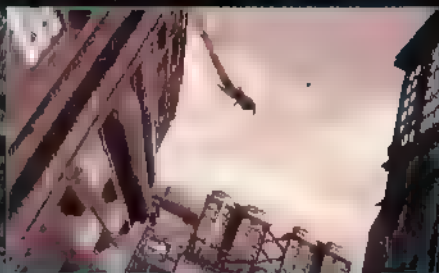
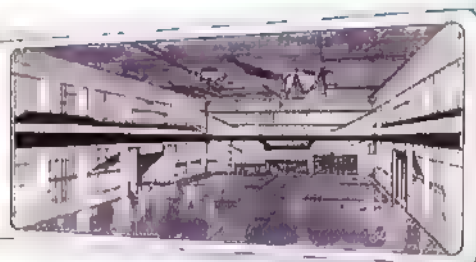
Argon Prime kickoff sector (climbing out of the teens and into the high 20s—pretty much the consensus on the message boards). According to Egosoft's patch readme, the bump came from reducing CPU load, tweaking shader performance, and fixing a HUD issue that caused the already minimalist interface to throttle frame speeds. Unfortunately, Egosoft opted to nullify some of those gains by heaping on additional details in several sectors to accommodate the mobile mining (of asteroids) model—where you could typically count asteroids on two hands before, v1.3 unnecessarily pops out interstellar rocks like Orville Redenbacher on Ritalin. Result: Unless you have a current-gen videocard, expect to suck up serious frame hits. When exploring or trading, this is a minimal bother, but it can turn dogfights into crosshair-steadying contests that instantly negate any visual perks. Game Theory 101: Save tempting additions for sequels or expansions and constrain postrelease focus to fixes.

Dogfights play big in the patched version; X3's universe links through dozens of bracketed sectors framed by warp gates connecting north, south, west, and east. Trade and military ships lumber from planet to planet peddling meatsteaks and ore, while pirates smuggle narcotics and occasionally skirmish with police patrols. The retail version included a backstory about an alien race called the kha'ak (the game's voice actors can't decide whether to pronounce this "car" or "cock"), though you'd rarely bump into them if you lit out randomly. According to player requests, the patch inverts the kha'ak spawn model and cranks the A.I.—making them commonplace, tactically smarter, and vastly more aggressive. That's good news for vets who know how to quickly score scratch for better weapons shields, and entirely new ships, but cash-strapped newbies may find that previously benign areas prove impossibly hostile. Do yourself a favor and dock often (to save) until you're fitted with a save-anywhere module.

Substandard stability was another unhappy and universal retail issue. Sector-entry bombs, random hange, mission-wrecking lockups... you can fling a thousand balls into the air, but it takes extraordinarily disciplined design to keep them there. While a few quirks seem to linger for a handful of users with hardware-configuration issues, the patch fixed every one of my nits, although Alt-Tabbing still throws the game into a sound-looping sleeper hold. It's a bit dicey pronouncing any game "rock solid" given driver and hardware variations, but the majority verdict online now favors the latest patch as stability friendly, and I can personally attest to eight-hour stretches of uninterrupted star trekking.

AN ECONOMY OF EMENDATIONS

In a free-form game this gargantuan, nothing is more difficult than critiquing economic supply and demand models, which, in the case of X3, range from hauling Argon beef and Delexian wheat between needy sectors



No, they didn't excise the "ally map rolls" wheel-side missions (and yes, they should've).



While the optional main story hasn't changed and still takes ingenuity to hash out, plot-kill bugs get tidily squashed in v1.3.



Your space compadres have a tendency to yammer repetitiously during combat.

to advanced options like placing your own factories and establishing closed or open factory loops (closed meaning only between your own factories, versus open loops, which give you more flexibility with local traders). It's still tough—short of publishing a white paper (such as X3's economic rigors)—to certify the economy completely salient, but a ton of minor patch tweaks altogether improve the weirder elements of the supply-demand system. Retail X3 skewed prices purely on demand, not stock, which meant that demand could stay artificially high for a product and out of sync with correspondingly abundant quantities of it. But the v1.3 patch now matches prices more realistically to availability.

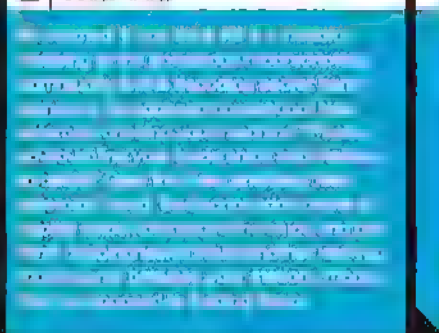
Borrowing (perhaps unwittingly) a page from war game developer HPS Sims, Egosoft also updated the online manual, fixing an egregious list of retail typos and inaccuracies, as well as adding 16 patch-related pages. You have to register your copy to download the PDF file, but it's indispensably helpful. And given the more-or-less normative industry practice of adding, changing, or removing features postrelease, this ought to become a de facto standard. Nothing's more irritating than integrating 20 pages of patch changes with a proportionately outdated booklet.

You're still on your own with the interface, however. While I personally don't mind the lack of a 3D cockpit (the game has so many ship

models that it was probably a dev-cycle decision), the HUD remains a twirling square of hard-to-follow targeting shapes, many of which overlap in tangled clusters or become impossible to quick-select given their diminutive proportions. The patch adds a context-sensitive "tutorial" that displays helpful information the first time you select any panel or button. That's good news if you're new to the series, but it doesn't make using the opaque interface any easier. Nothing short of a total overhaul (which is not going to happen) could fix X3, so let this serve as notice for potential sequels: Study *World of Warcraft* as the definitive, proof-serving example of how to put a billion features in a game and still make them as simple to pick up as the ones in *Super Mario Bros.*

If X3 v1.0 was the evil *Star Trek*-mirror-universe version, the v1.3 patch is its almost-triumphant shining twin. In the space of a few short months, Egosoft's mammoth patches (v1.3 clocks in at a hefty 119MB) converted the game from something only Rube Goldberg could have loved into the bustling X-series, update X3 was always meant to be. While crabby demagogues always (always!) claim that nothing tops Braben and Bell's *Elite*, Egosoft's X3 is certainly a top contender. And now we have a version to match that vision. / **Matt Peckham**

KOD JOB



COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT

X3's still arrantly angled toward fanatics, but the patches solidly bump it from "avoid" to "acquire."



THE HUD REMAINS A TWIRLING SQUARE OF
HARD-TO-FOLLOW TARGETING SHAPES

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD OF THE MORPG ADDICT

THE FINAL FANTASY

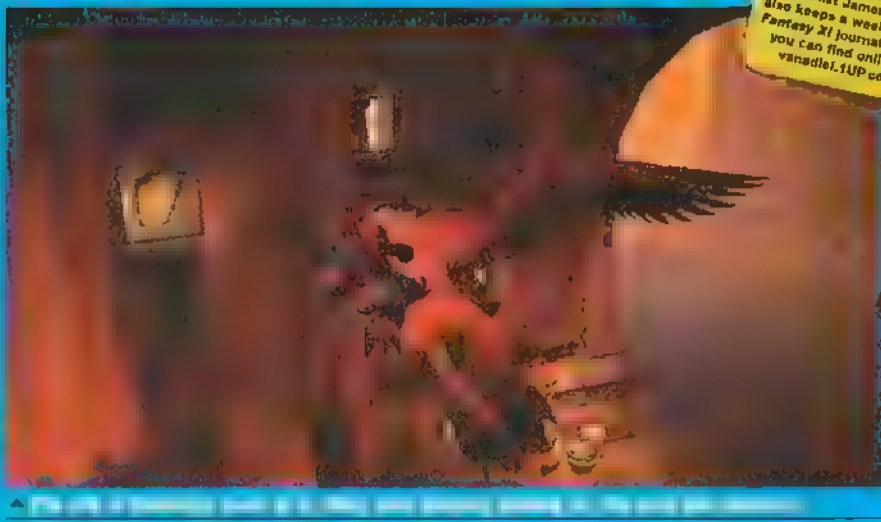
Columnist James Mielke also keeps a weekly *Final Fantasy XI* journal, which you can find online at vanadiel.1UP.com.

WORLD OF LAGCRAFT

It's a common sight in the virtual world of *World of Warcraft*: A player character stands in a crowded marketplace, surrounded by other players, and suddenly the screen goes black. The player is "lagged out" of the game. This is a common problem in the game, and it's a problem that's been plaguing the game since its release. The problem is caused by a combination of factors, including the game's massive player base and the game's complex graphics. The game's developers have tried to fix the problem, but it's still a major issue. The game's developers have tried to fix the problem, but it's still a major issue. The game's developers have tried to fix the problem, but it's still a major issue.

LAG CITY

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» A LOT OF THE PROBLEMS BEGAN TO TRIBE AWAY, BUT NOT IN RIONFORET

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WOW WITHDRAWAL

The problem is caused by a combination of factors, including the game's massive player base and the game's complex graphics. The game's developers have tried to fix the problem, but it's still a major issue. The game's developers have tried to fix the problem, but it's still a major issue. The game's developers have tried to fix the problem, but it's still a major issue.

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1UP.com executive editor James Mielke spends every iota of his free time playing online games. He needs help—badly.

TOM vs. BRUCE

LAST MONTH

Bruce headed back to *World of Warcraft* after seeing how much more successful Tom's *The Sims 2: Open for Business* family was than his.

STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR

Star Warped

▲ The part of the game that Bruce likes.

PUBLISHER: LucasArts DEVELOPER: Petroglyph GENRE: RTS ESRB RATING: T
REQUIRED: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.7GB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED: 3GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 256MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players

BRUCE: I'm not ashamed to admit it: I love me some *Star Wars*. On one hand, you've got the Empire (aka Nazi Germany) with its black uniforms and bizarre, yet effective, killing machines. And on the other hand, you've got the Rebellion with its red emblems on its planes and Little Red Books in its pockets, ready to bring a special brand of supernatural-based Communism to the galaxy. So every time anyone on either side



▲ Captain Antilles (no relation to Wodger) in his ship during the battle of Nal Hutta.

dies, it means one less scumbag threatening our freedoms. It's win-win for all concerned.

TOM: I find it interesting that after his little analysis, Bruce chose the Empire. Make of that what you will. We're playing the Galactic Conflict campaign. The planets are arranged in a giant ring, with the Rebels on the right and the Empire on the left. Neutral planets lie between us, at the top and bottom of the ring. Canda, a little world barely worth the effort, sits on top at the 12 o'clock position. At the bottom of the ring, at the 6 o'clock position, sits Nal Hutta.

BRUCE: I call the bottom "the Nal Hutta side" and the top "the other side." I can't even remember the name of the planet Tom said was up there, which shows you just how important it is. Because of LucasArts' unashamed endorsement of crime, the best planets are the ones like Nal Hutta. It has a black market, like they used to have in Russia when the government factories couldn't make enough toilet paper and blue jeans and you had to sneak them in from Sweden. Nal Hutta generates so much toilet-paper revenue

that whoever fails to control it loses the game. Kind of like the real Sweden.

TOM: Well, Bruce is almost right. Nal Hutta, the homeworld of the crime-inclined Hutts, is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, Carida and Nal Hutta also serve as gateways to a cluster of four planets in the middle of the map. The jewel of the Galactic Conflict campaign, Coruscant, is here. If you come into this central cluster through Nal Hutta, you'll come to Alderaan. The bonus for controlling Alderaan: All my infantry will take only half damage.

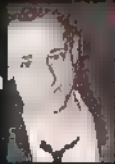
BRUCE: Yeah, those middle planets. You can go in there and try to conquer them, but that just means your fleet has to go flying around while Tom Chick destroys all your bases. All your bases are belong to him! Had you ever heard that one before? I made it up myself.

TOM: Nal Hutta is also the Rebels' best early chance to control a lucrative mining world. The Empire starts with Geonosis, but the Rebels have no such equivalent. So until I seize Nal Hutta and start building mining installations, I'll be at a serious financial disadvantage. It's just like a bunch of plucky Rebels not to have any infrastructure. But all the pluck in the galaxy doesn't do any good without a few cruisers to back it up.

➤ I CALL THE BOTTOM "THE NAL HUTTA SIDE" AND THE TOP "THE OTHER SIDE." I CAN'T EVEN REMEMBER THE NAME OF THE PLANET TOM SAID WAS UP THERE, WHICH SHOWS YOU JUST HOW IMPORTANT IT IS.

TWO GAMERS
ENTER, ONE
GAMER WINS

players



Tom Chick

In addition to being one of the videogame industry's most prolific freelance journalists, Tom also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.



Bruce Geryk

Longtime CGW contributor, Bruce Geryk has written about videogames for over 20 years; he loves war games like most people love oxygen.

Also, the Rebels can use Nal Hutta to build smugglers and bounty hunters, whereas the Empire can recruit unsavory units on Aztem, one of its starting planets. So as soon as the game starts, it's all about taking Nal Hutta.

BRUCE: Getting shut out of Nal Hutta sucks, so I'm going to try and rush the planet as soon as I can get enough ships together. Neutral planets are guarded by space pirates until conquered. Space pirates fight you in space combat, which is how it should be.

The space combat is the best part of the game. When I say "best part," you should just imagine me saying "only good part," but in a language that is untranslatable except by those universal translators that haven't been invented yet. So "best part" is as good a translation as you can have with today's technology.

TOM: As soon as the game starts, I'll wait for Bruce to get to Nal Hutta—because I know that's exactly where he's going—and then I'll move in after he's taken some casualties from his battle with the space pirates. Speaking of the game starting, you've probably noticed that we're doing a lot of talking without actually playing yet. That's because the campaign mode and its interface run in real time. Once the game actually starts, we won't have time for nuances like "figuring out what to do."

BRUCE: Apparently, Tom and I had the exact same thought about Nal Hutta at the chronologically indistinguishable same time. Actually, it was distinguishable by about three milliseconds, which is how much sooner my fleet arrived and, thus, fought all the pirates.

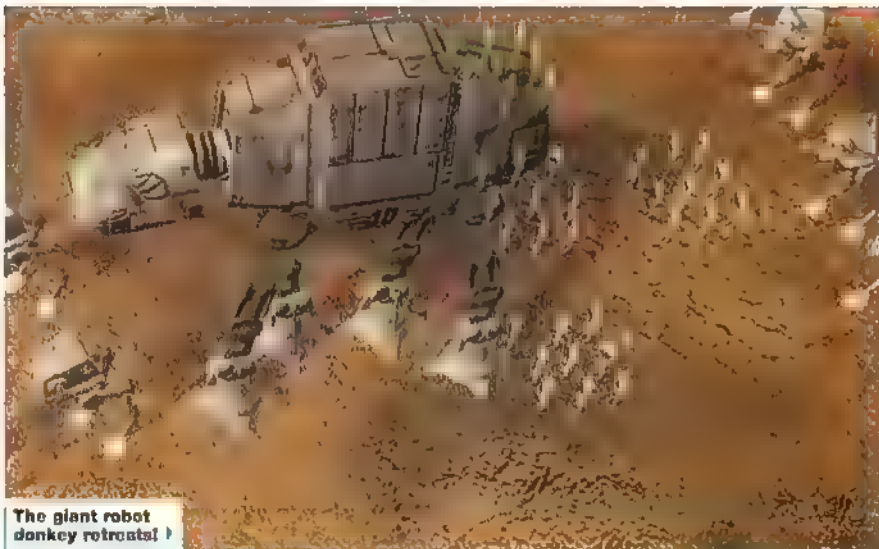
TOM: Unfortunately, the neutral space pirates guarding Nal Hutta didn't have much of an effect. Our two fleets are pretty evenly matched.

BRUCE: Ah, space combat. I like this part.

TOM: Bruce has somehow managed to learn the tenets of realistic space combat. He holds his star destroyers back and uses his respawning TIE fighters to keep back my Y-wings. I stick around for far too long, foolishly hoping to inflict more casualties. In the end, only Ackbar and Luke escape alive.

BRUCE: I won, but the only one left who could invade the planet was someone named Veers, who is apparently a giant robot donkey. I know this because Tom attacks my new planet three milliseconds after I conquer it, forcing me to play a real-time strategy game in which my robot donkey fights his whole army. I'm really not interested, so I just retreat. However, my robot donkey gets killed because I didn't know you had to walk your guys back to the reinforcement point when you retreat. I thought Scotty could work those transporters anywhere!

TOM: I've got control of Nal Hutta now, thanks to Obi-Wan sneaking in as a raiding party. But Bruce is in orbit overhead. I fly in some reinforcements in case he tries to invade. Then I start building mines and finally queue up a cantina so I can send smugglers to Geonosis. If



The giant robot donkey retreats!

you can identify your opponent's most lucrative planet (for Bruce, it will certainly be Geonosis), you can effectively leech half of its income away for the price of a single smuggler.

BRUCE: One of the things this game gets totally right is the differences between the two sides. The Empire builds all these big starships and ground installations and whatnot while the Rebellion scoots around, raiding planets with its heroes and generally being a pain. Which is precisely Tom's style. Oh, look, here he is now on one of my planets, even though I totally trashed his fleet.

TOM: Once I've secured the ground on Nal Hutta, Obi-Wan leads a raiding party to Geonosis. The indigenous population is aligned with the Rebels, so any time ground combat breaks out, I get free respawning infantry. In this case, they're the scary-looking insects you saw in *Episode II*. They totally suck, but Bruce probably doesn't know that.

BRUCE: Bugs, Mr. Ricot Zillions of 'em! Yeah, I know. Nothing's funnier than people who pretend they're so cool that they can't tell the difference between *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* by inserting a quote from one series into a discussion about the other. It's a cheap gag, and I shouldn't stoop that low. My god, it's full of stars! Sorry again.

TOM: While the bugs bottle up Bruce's soldiers in their main base, I send Obi-Wan with his troops and scout tanks to find any bullying buildings. I destroy two mining installations and then safely retreat. Until I get my Nal Hutta smuggling ring underway, I'd like to limit Bruce's income.

BRUCE: The problem with multiplayer *Empire at War* is that I might have to actually play the land battles, which are tedious. In the solo game, I just autoresolve them. A lot of tedium exists in this game, except that since it's in real time, it's actually excitement. I'm sure that's what the designers think. Otherwise, how can they possibly justify an interface this bad? It's funny



Obi-Wan visits Geonosis to harass Bruce.



Obi-Wan decides to bring a little bit of artillery this time.



Bug insurgency!



▲ Bruce's star destroyers pay a little unexpected visit to Mon Calamari.



▲ Eat laser, Mon Mothma!

how the default setting is to have all the planet information turned off, and you have to hit four separate toggles to turn it all on. It's like the game doesn't want you to use much genuine strategy.

TOM: When I'm not knocking out the minig installations Bruce is trying to build, I'm constructing a replacement fleet. I've got a bunch of fighters, since I don't think Bruce knows the unit balance well enough to build the Tartan patrol cruisers that chew up fighters. He's in love with his star destroyers—a common Imperial mistake.

BRUCE: The real irony is that the more units you build, the less strategy you can use. In one solo game, I spent 15 minutes chasing fleets around a triangle of three planets, out of a galaxy of 40 planets. But I couldn't take my attention off the enemy's activities until I wiped out all its forces, so the rest of the galaxy sort of went on standby. Of course, this could have all been avoided by making the game turn-based, but all designers know that's a niche market for obsessive losers, right? Plus, no turn-based gamer would ever accept an interface this clumsy. Oh, wait. Tom is attacking me again, so I have to go fight on that bug planet. Be right back.

TOM: Bruce is right about how most games revolve around a few key planets. The trick is to not ignore the rest of the galaxy. Since Bruce is obviously using his whole fleet to bottle me up on Nal Hutta, I split off a few ships to go through Carida and into those midgalaxy planets. I need to get to Alderaan for the bonus it will give my infantry. I've got this game in the bag if I can keep Bruce focused on Nal Hutta.

BRUCE: As any scientist knows, research takes lots of time and money. What he might not know is that it also requires building a single research center and then clicking on the tech-upgrade button every time you have a lot of cash. This is sort of the basic countdown: It takes forever for the research center to finish building, and then another four forevers to research the Death Star tech. So even if your institute doesn't get commando-raided by Wookiees, it will be a long time before you can start planet smashing. Mainly because Tom keeps starting battles on

that stupid bug planet every five minutes.

TOM: At least give Bruce credit for knowing that "Wookiees" has two E's.

BRUCE: I need to check that fleet orbiting Geonosis. Hovering my cursor over it tells me that it has some of those meta-ostriches in it. Those are land units, so I need to split them out. No problem. I'll just double-click on the planet they're orbiting so that it takes me out of the strategic map (where I can't see Tom attacking), and then I'll drag all of the units into a separate fleet—one by one, because the game has no group selection. Then I'll unzoom to the main screen and finally move those ground units to a different planet. Is it a bad interface or just a simulation of how actual galactic supreme commanders would do it in real life? Oh, look. Tom is attacking me again with his zillions of bugs.

TOM: I can keep up these insect-assisted commando raids for the whole game. Maybe frequent bug insurgencies are a form of grieving. I like to think that people back on the Imperial home planet are calling for an immediate pullout from Geonosis, with Bruce's approval rating at somewhere around 34 percent.

BRUCE: This is getting really tedious. Eventually, we'll run out of time because Tom has to go to his Friday-night D&D game, so I'm going to make sure we have more space combat instead of ground combat. The next planet in line is Mon Calamari. That's like a Rebel base or something, right? OK. I send my fleet over to see what Tom has at My Squid.

TOM: I had my space station built up over Mon Calamari and didn't expect Bruce to attack. Now half of my fleet is in the middle of the galaxy, pushing past Byss toward Alderaan.

BRUCE: It looks like Tom has a space station, some fighters, and a few of those annoying Corellian frigates. Oh yeah, and Mon Mothma. Is that a made-up character or what? I don't remember her being in any of the movies. And how lame is it to make the Empire victory condition to kill Mon Mothma? I want to kill Princess Leia! Talk about a bait and switch. Wait a minute. Victory condition? Holy heck! Do I have a chance to beat

Tom at an RTS? A Star Wars RTS, to boot?

TOM: Oops. Mon Mothma was at Mon Calamari to initiate the construction of some newly researched missile corvettes when the Imperial fleet arrived. However, I'm not too worried. I've got a level 3 space station and a handful of ships, most of them fighters. Bruce is just flinging ships at me out of boredom, so I'm confident that I can win this battle. I send Mon Mothma's transport to the farthest corner of the map.

BRUCE: Why does my minimap show a little green square in the lower-right corner? What could Tom be hiding there?

TOM: When Bruce's TIE fighters peeled off, I assumed he was going to scatter them around to look for Mon Mothma. He knows from the hero roster at the top of the screen that she's here somewhere. So I keep a couple of squadrons of X-wings on a hotkey, ready to close their S-foils and go racing to the defense in case one of his searching TIEs stumbles across her.

But the last thing I expect is about 10 squadrons of TIEs suddenly bursting into the sensor radius of Mon Mothma's transport! I frantically try to scramble all my fighters and corvettes to her defense, locking S-foils and using engine boosts. She runs away and gets a good head start as the TIEs wheel around her, trying to line up shots. But then here come the slower TIE bombers bringing up the rear. They sweep in and loose a barrage of perfectly aimed shots—she stands no chance. How could Bruce have known exactly where she was hiding? This is just another instance of the developers not making it clear what one side can see and the other can't, and when. Thanks, Petroglyph, for losing me the game!

BRUCE: For once in my gaming life, one of Tom's cheat codes backfired on him and revealed the location of his secret Rebel base. Or leader, I guess. Is Mon Mothma related to Mon Calamari? It's all so confusing. I guess that's what the next three movies are going to be about. Me winning, I mean.

Bruce's Empire defeats Tom's Rebellion on day nine.

I LIKE TO THINK THAT PEOPLE ON THE IMPERIAL HOME PLANET ARE CALLING FOR AN IMMEDIATE PULLOUT FROM GEONOSIS, WITH BRUCE'S APPROVAL RATING AT SOMEWHERE AROUND 34 PERCENT.

REALITY CHECK

YOUR HANDY GUIDE TO WHAT WE SAY—AND WHAT THEY SAY—ABOUT THE LATEST IN PC GAMING



EMPIRE EARTH II: THE ART OF SUPREMACY

We say: "The whole thing feels more like feature creep in a box than an expansion pack. Even for fans of *Empire Earth II*—in fact, especially for fans of *Empire Earth II*—the *Art of Supremacy* expansion provides a disappointing exercise in uninspired padding."

—**Tom Chick, CGW** (1/5)

They say: "222 fans should keep their money in their wallets—you're not missing anything."

—**GameSpy** (2/6)



MARC ECKO'S GETTING UP: CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE

We say: "The worst thing a decent action game can suffer from is bad camera control, and this melody afflicts *Getting Up*."

The janky camera makes combat tough during crucial moments and makes things increasingly difficult when you're riding against the clock to lay down an aerosol tag."

—**Kim Matlock, 1UP.com** (7/10)

They say: "I appreciate what this game is trying to do."

—**IGN** (7/10)



GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II: DREAD LORDS

We say: "Almost every design decision in the game led to a final product that's all about making significant and interesting decisions each turn and less about pretending to be a space lord... And for the second time in a row, the decision to forgo multiplayer in favor of a scenario-based solo campaign is so odd."

—**Bruce Avery, 1UP.com** (9/10)

They say: "Galactic Civilizations II actually manages to rise to the challenge."

—**HGN** (8/7/10)



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II

We say: "When we look back in 10 years, *BFME2* will likely be viewed as a great, if not exemplary, strategic foray into Tolkien's world. We have not to say something dull like 'fans can't afford to miss it,' but, you know, it's possibly the first time anyone's been able to say that about any Middle-earth game. Ever."

—**Matt Peckham, 1UP.com** (8.5/10)

They say: "Battle for Middle-earth II is certainly a better version of 2004's great strategy game."

—**GameSpot** (8.3/10)



TOCA RACE DRIVER 3

We say: "If Codemasters can just concentrate on making each and every series drive as well as most of its stand-alone racing products do, the ToCA games will return to their former glory in the years to come. If that means cutting back on the different divisions offered within the game, so be it."

—**Doug Stewart, 1UP.com** (8.5/10)

They say: "ToCA 3 is a racer with a deep, lasting impact."

—**GameSpot** (8.5/10)

SCORECARD

Names in blue indicate CGW Editors' Choice games.

Game	RELEASE	IGN	IGN NETWORK	ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY	GAMESPOT	IGN
Empire Earth II: The Art of Supremacy	Feb 2006		1/5	5.4/10	2/5	—
Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords	Feb 2006		9/10	9/10	4.5/5	8.7/10
The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II	Feb 2006		8.8/10	8.3/10	3.5/5	9/10
Marc Ecko's Getting Up	Feb 2006		7/10	8.4/10	—	7/10
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	Feb 2006		4/10	8/10	2/5	6.5/10
The Sims 2: Open for Business	Feb 2006		7/10	8/10	4/5	7.8/10
Star Wars Empire at War	Feb 2006		8/10	8.7/10	3.5/5	7.6/10
SWAT 4: The Stetchkov Syndicate	Feb 2006		4.5/5	8.2/10	—	8.5/10
ToCA Race Driver 3	Feb 2006		6.5/10	8.5/10	—	—
Tycoon City: New York	Feb 2006		—	—	2.5/5	7/10



ISSUE 262

TECH

GEAR TO HELP YOU
COMPENSATE FOR
OTHER SHORTCOMINGS

HEY, WHERE DID MY OLD TECH SECTION GO?

This issue marks a glorious new age of geekdom for CGW, and the gearheads at ExtremeTech.com. That's right: your favorite computer gaming pub is shaking hands with that wacky little thing called the Internet. Every month in these pages, we'll provide a detailed look at another piece of the gaming hardware puzzle, arming you with the basic knowledge you need to not feel like a total putz at the store. Looking for more details and definitive hardware reviews of the products mentioned here? Turn on that thing that passes for a computer and make with the surfing. Everything you need to know is online right now at ExtremeTech.com.

LCD MONITORS 101

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOU HAVE under the hood. All the dual-core CPUs, SLI/CrossFire-loaded motherboards, and monstrously oversized graphics cards in the world don't count for squat without a good monitor to back them up. You're dumping the GNP of third-world nations into your rig? Great. All that's coming between you and a drop-dead gorgeous image now is a screen you probably haven't upgraded—let alone cleaned—in years. You may as well hook your 'puter up to a black-and-white TV.

The good news is that once you buy a good monitor, it'll last you a lot longer than any computer ever will. So what do you do? Stick with some CRT monitor or shell out cash for an LCD panel? Marketers will throw numbers at you, the jackholes

at the store will try to sell you on the most expensive thing in the place. Before cracking open the wallet, get all the facts straight. You've got questions, and we've got the answers right here.

It's time to become an Instant Expert.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

QUESTION: Aren't CRT monitors better?

ANSWER: If you asked that question a couple of years ago about gaming monitors, you'd be right—with no fight from us. Some of the faithful who live and die by the electron gun do have some valid points.

-CRTs have an infinite color range.

True. LCD panels are currently boasting as many as 16.7 million colors.

-You get better viewing angles from a CRT

That's correct, but the viewing angles of LCD

displays are widening. Really, though, how many of you plan to play *Battlefield 2* from a 90-degree angle, anyway?

-CRT monitors don't have the resolution constraints of LCDs.

Again, true. LCD panels work best at fixed resolutions. We'll get to all that soon enough.

-Comparatively, LCD displays are rife with color smearing, blurring, and piss-poor response times—definitely not worth the inflated price tag.

This is where the CRT faithful's argument is now falling apart. LCD panel performance is jumping, while prices continue to plummet.

Q: What's so damn great about an LCD panel, anyhow?

A: Much brighter than some crummy CRT set, LCDs remain clearly viewable even in bright rooms. You know what this means? You won't have to lock yourself in that cave to play anymore. With tweaking, an LCD also provides crisp onscreen text. Here's something that LCDs don't have: flicker and geometric distortion—problems that you often find with CRT sets and that can cause eye fatigue.

That's not what you care about, though, is it? LCDs are smaller and lighter—perfect for LAN parties—and, frankly, they look a whole lot slicker on your desktop. Unless you want to look like you're still rocking a Pentium 90, that is.

Q: Aren't LCDs expensive?

A: Yeah, but that's all relative. The prices are quickly dropping to the point where you can get a decent 17-inch panel (which, coincidentally, has roughly the same viewing area as a 19-inch CRT) for about \$250. All this should be moot in a few years, though, considering that fewer manufacturers are pumping out CRTs.

Q: What the hell do all these specs mean?

A: Now that you've gotten over the fear of buying an LCD, it's time to focus. What matters to gam-

BENQ FP202W

VERDICT: MEDIOCRE

The FP202W doesn't have what someone has to build an average product. The FP202W is a 20-inch widescreen unit with a 1680x1060 pixel resolution that screens "meh." The contrast ratio is average. The color temperature setting we could easily obtain was still well above our recommended 6,500 degrees K. We saw noticeable color shifting when moving to wider viewing angles. In addition, dark spaces seemed muddy and lacked detail. We can't even say that the monitor had decent black levels; they were more like "dark gray." Response times compensated a little, as we saw no ghosting or smearing during video playback or gaming sessions.

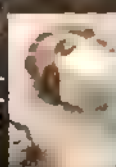
The unit, though, is pretty nifty. The FP202W lacks component and S-video inputs, and it doesn't offer a TV tuner or USB ports. The only reason to consider buying this is if it's less than \$400. Even then, we'd say why you aren't buying a 19-inch monitor to something better.



WIKITIP: Cheaper
WIKITIP: \$550
Website: www.benq.com

INSTANT EXPERT:

CGW's Darren Gladstone gets deep with flat-panel displays



Tech Medics
This month:
We had a break in the action, but we're back to answer more questions about which graphics cards to buy.

DELL 3007WFP

VERDICT: WHOA!

While initially built for video pros, the 3007WFP is the poster child for dual-graphics-card technology. Why? You'll need SLI or CrossFire modes to hit this monitor's 2660x1600 resolution and still be playable with most games. Those burning to use Dell's 30-inch beast, be warned: Unless your graphics card supports dual-link DVI (i.e., Nvidia GeForce 7800 series cards, or ATI X1600 and X1800 cards), you'll be stuck running your brand-new, 4-megapixel display at a 1200x800 resolution. Playing *Half-Life 2: Lost Coast* on this monitor is a treat for the eyes. The excellent colors and contrast on the 3007WFP become obvious with every reflection and lens flare. It smoothly handles action (its 11ms response time is excellent,

considering the screen size) without creating onscreen chunkage. On the other hand, the monitor does cost more than two 1600x1200 flat panels (even pricey ones). While we love this monitor, it may be best to wait until the price comes down.//

WHO'S HOT: Rich, Mac-and-camera
HOW MUCH: \$5,500
Website: www.dell.com



ers is blazing-fast, distortion-free performance. As a result, you should keep a number of factors to keep in mind when checking out monitors. Here are some of the big things advertised on the box.

RESPONSE TIME. (Also called pixel-response rate.) Measured in milliseconds (ms), (this refers to how quickly a pixel changes color. The lower the number, the faster it can change—and, considering the frenzied pace of most games, quick color shifts are pretty damn important. Older LCD panels suffered from blurring and color smearing because the displays had slow response times (higher numbers). These days, we see monitors on the market that are as fast as 2ms, virtually as quick as a CRT. Here's what you need to remember: The larger the screen, the slower the response time. Also, here's

a big tip-off for you—don't buy an LCD rated higher than 16ms.

SCREEN SIZE AND ASPECT RATIO. Don't think that you need to get supersized when it comes to monitors—but don't sell yourself short, either. Anything smaller than a 17-inch display (measured diagonally) is a waste. Does that mean you can go out and buy the biggest monitor and run it at the highest resolution, trouble free? No. Bigger isn't always better, either. What the hell? You can't win. The truth is, not every one of those mouthwatering larger-than-life screens can handle your gaming needs. While Dell's new 30-inch panel is gorgeous and works fantastically, most panels growing beyond 23 inches have slower response times. That means you run the risk of blurry images.

PRO TIPS

HOW TO LOOK LIKE A HARDWARE HERO



- > Do you ever intend to watch Blu-ray or HD-DVD content (or own Windows Vista)? Check to see if the monitor supports HDCP over DVI.
- > Is that LCD well built? Depending on how it was produced, the panel can have a better viewing angle (in-plane switching) or faster response times (PVS).
- > Pay attention to the color rendering. You'll see banding with 6-bits-per-pixel technology. Opt for monitors with 8 bits per pixel instead.
- > People generally don't pay enough attention to onscreen displays. Ease of use is important!
- > Glass screens may sound like a good idea, but you're just begging for glare.
- > Turn down the brightness on your monitor! Most panels are usually too bright. One performance tip: Use the software settings (in the control-center software for your graphics card) to tweak screen brightness.
- > Make sure that the monitor comes with DVI cables. You'd be surprised how many don't—check that out before you buy!
- > Each monitor is like a snowflake: Due to the manufacturing process, no two are alike. That means reviews are relative; find out a store's return policy in case you're not happy with the results.//

NEVER AGAIN FEAR TALKING TO SALESPeople AT THE COMPUTER STORE. CGW AND EXTREMETECH.COM PUT THEIR HEADS TOGETHER TO TEACH YOU EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW.

LCD MONITORS



TESTING, TESTING

DEAD PIXELS. You can look for various in-game issues with a monitor in a number of ways. But first, do you see dead pixels? It's not uncommon to find a couple of burn pixels in a display. Open a web browser to "about:blank." Hit F11 and start hunting for small black specks (the ones that aren't dust). Now, let's fire up a game and see what happens.

COLOR AND CONTRAST. You can check these in several ways—either fire up an art program like Paint Shop Pro or use what Nvidia and ATI give you. When you install the videocard manufacturer's control center program, you can also tweak color and brightness settings. Even in-game reference point: you know what the colors of the grass are right?

RESPONSE TIME. This is the most difficult one to judge, and it's a keep-eyes-on. Poor response times often result in motion blurring. Just be wary of games, like *RE.A.R.*, that intentionally use blurring effects. One good way to spot errors: Look for things you know should be straight. Buildings, fences, columns, pillars—you get the idea.

VIEWING ANGLES. A simple enough test: Move your head around. Do the colors remain consistent? Do you see inverse images at any point? (By the way, the viewing angle on this page is awesome. Test it for yourself! Keep the magazine in one place and move your head.)

what the manufacturers say, and make your own observations. Go to the store and see if you're comfortable with what the monitor looks like. Keep in mind that the larger the monitor, the greater the chances of experiencing ghosting. But shoot for a monitor that yields a 160-degree vertical and horizontal viewing angle.

Q: What's the deal with DVI?

A: Understand that LCDs are digital devices. While you may find VGA (analog) inputs on low-end monitors, most sport DVI (digital) connections—or even both. You won't notice a very big performance difference between the two these days, but DVI is always going to be the preferable way to hook up your gaming rig. Considering that the last few generations of graphics cards come with DVI-out jacks, this really is a nonissue.

Well, that's not entirely true. DVI comes in two

flavors: DVI-I (integrated analog and digital) and DVI-D (pure digital). If you're stuck with an old VGA graphics card, ditch it. Otherwise, DVI-I connections require a small adapter that connects the monitor to a VGA cable. Then we have dual-link DVI. High-end monitors, like Dell's 3007WFP, demand a lot of extra data for that huge display. Fortunately, most of today's high-end graphics cards support that technology.

Q: Any other features I should check?

A: That all depends on your preferences. Do you want a couple of extra USB ports? Monitors often serve as unpowered hubs. Maybe you want a built-in memory card reader. One handy thing that gamers often love: An audio jack built into the monitor. It keeps you from reaching down behind the PC to plug in headphones. Console gamers can look for monitors that serve double duty—some panels have TV tuners and component video connections.

Q: Glossy screens—are they worth the money?

A: If you game in a bright environment that gives off a lot of glare, yes. The anti-glare coating goes by different names. Sony calls it Xbrite, Acer calls it CrystalBright, but the goal is the same: to reduce glare and ambient light. Our tests show that you really do get a more vivid picture. Just make sure that you really need it and that you aren't paying an extra premium for the privilege.

Q: So what should I buy, smart guy?

A: We put our heads together and came up with a rough guide. If the sky's the limit and you own a yacht, enjoy the Dell 3007WFP, Mr. Trump. But we're keeping an eye on the sweet spot—that happy meeting place between size, performance, and price. Right now, with some smart online shopping, you can find a 20-inch monitor with a 16:10 aspect ratio for around \$500. /



WITH SMART ONLINE SHOPPING, YOU CAN FIND A GOOD MONITOR FOR AROUND \$500.

EXTREME TECH

TECH MEDICS

ExtremeTech's Jason Cross will see you now

Q: I cannot believe that, after being a subscriber for 13 years, my first letter to you is going to include the cliché question of "Which is the best videocard to buy?" But it is, so shut up and answer my questions. I'm trying to squeeze another year or so from my Pentium 3.2GHz system with an AGP slot. I want to buy the fastest AGP card available. It seems to me that either the Radeon X850 XT PE or the EVGA 7800 GS CO Superclock cards are the fastest AGP cards I'm going to find. Your thoughts?

Also, I'm considering buying a bigger LCD monitor. I would like a 23-inch or 24-inch widescreen, but I'm confused about this "native resolution" thing. Is this the resolution you must use to get the best results from the monitor?

Kevin Federlco

A: Let's see—13 years, multiplied by the annual subscription rate.... Kevin, we do believe you are entitled to an answer. First, you're absolutely right about the videocards: Those are your two fastest options for AGP. You could substitute XFX's or BFG's overclocked 7800 GS cards for the EVGA—just get whichever you find a better price on.

Native resolution is simply the physical resolution of the LCD monitor. CRT ("tube") monitors have no fixed resolution—they draw the screen with an electron gun that sweeps scan lines back and forth. But LCDs have a fixed number of pixels, so if the native resolution of an LCD is 1280x1024, then it has exactly 1280 pixels across by 1024 pixels up and down. If you run your Windows desktop, a game, or any other application at a different resolution, the monitor will have to scale the image to fit, which doesn't look as good. For best results, you'll want to run your games and desktop at the same resolution as your LCD.

Q: The bulk of the world has DSL, but those few of us who have "time" to travel in motor homes and park on a beach somewhere in places like New Zealand end up using Vodafone's GPRS wireless to play online. The up/down transfer rate on the Vodafone 3G isn't very fast—it normally runs between 30 and 40k—which brings me to the question: Which online game will play better on this slow bandwidth, *EverQuest II* or *World of Warcraft*?

Gordon Stinson

A: That's a tough one, Gordon. Both games support 56k modem connections, but both recommend broadband for the best experience. Either game is going to bog down in high-bandwidth areas like cities or during player-versus-player combat when lots of active things occupy the screen. *World of Warcraft* is a little more friendly to solo and small-group play, which might help your situation. The real problem: You're using a GPRS wireless connection. The latency on those connections is often worse than that of a good 56k dial-up connection, and, of course, far worse than DSL or a cable modem.

Q: In your opinion, would *Flight Sim X* (or any flight simulator) benefit from a dual-core CPU? I know that flight simulation games of any sort usually hit the CPU hard, but it seems to me that a dual-core chip would help. Or would this be a case of the game needing to be written to take advantage of two cores?

David Brown

A: Games do need to be written to take advantage of dual-core CPUs in order to achieve any real benefit. It's true that both ATI and Nvidia have some dual-core optimizations in their graphics drivers, but that doesn't deliver nearly

the improvement that a dual-core optimized game will. The good news: Many games in development today are being written with multi-core CPUs in mind, since single-core CPUs are quickly going the way of the dodo. Not many current flight simulator titles are so optimized, but you can bet most of the future ones will be. As for *Flight Sim X*, we asked Microsoft and found out that it is indeed multithreaded and should benefit from dual-core CPUs.

Q: I own a Gateway Profile, and, for the most part, it does me quite well. It has Pentium 4 3GHz, 1GB of RAM, a 160GB hard drive, and a GeForce FX 5200 with a massive-big-huge-grand-whopping 64MB. Awesome, no? No. While it does all right with some games, it doesn't even begin to scrape the minimum requirements of the games I really want to play. Is it possible to upgrade to something a little meatier, given the fact that everything needs to be crammed into a cute little minibox?

Brian V.

A: Unfortunately, most models of the Gateway Profile (it's gone through about five design iterations) don't offer any way to plug in a new graphics card, even if you can track down a low-profile card. However, we're not sure if that's true of every Gateway Profile model, so it might be a good idea to call Gateway support and ask. If you're able to upgrade at all, you'll need a low-profile card, which will probably come at a bit of a price premium and still won't handle really high-end stuff. However, it should do better than that god-awful GeForce FX 5200. Good luck!

Got questions? Send them to
Tech_Medics@earthlink.net



ISSUE 262

ON FILEFRONT

THE LATEST
AND GREATEST
PC DEMOS

FileFront

Starting this month, *Computer Gaming World* joins forces with FileFront.com to bring you both the best possible PC gaming editorial and access to the top gaming downloads, including demos, mods, drivers, and more. What does this mean to you? No more waiting for that CD-ROM every month! Of course, if you need a nudge as to what to grab, we'll happily point you in the right direction within these pages. Check out these hot picks from the FileFront editors.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE- EARTH II (DEMO)

Play as either dwarves or goblins in this RTS demo, which offers two tutorials and two single-player maps: Withered Heath and Harlindon.

X3: REUNION (DEMO)

Check out some key game concepts in this demo. The deadly kha'ak will be there, too—so watch your back.

SPELLFORCE 2: SHADOW WARS (DEMO)

Get a feel for this RPG by following along with the tutorial, or make your way through the first missions of the campaign.

DROPTTEAM MULTIPLAYER BETA (DEMO)

Check out this upcoming sci-fi-themed armored-vehicle combat simulation. This multiplayer beta allows you to try out two scenarios: Ice Field and Raid.

COMMANDOS STRIKE FORCE (DEMO)

Play as a sniper or a Green Beret in this single-player demo, featuring two missions from the full game.

SWAT 4: THE STETCHKOV SYNDICATE (VIDEO)

Scope out the footage of SWAT 4's recently released expansion pack for a taste of more tactical first-person action.

MAGIC BALL 2: NEW WORLDS (SHAREWARE)

This sequel to the classic shareware hit features all-new 3D designs, power-ups, weapons, and animated characters.

CALL OF DUTY 2 PLAYER NOTIFIER V1.1 (APPLICATION)

This second release allows you to monitor a particular server and receive notifications when players enter and exit, or when the server goes down.

CLAN MEMBERS VIEWER V1.0 (APPLICATION)

CMV is a handy organizer that allows your clan members to register their personal information and communication information for other members to view.

HALF-LIFE 2: THE HIDDEN (MOD)

This popular mod offers a unique multiplayer experience: one player is a genetically engineered "ghost in the machine," and everyone else hunts him down.

BATTLEFIELD 2 V1.21 (PATCH)

This update fixes issues with heat-seeking missiles, claymores, the battle recorder, screen captures, and more.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION (VIDEO)

Haven't picked up the game yet? Swing by FileFront and check out the combat footage from *Oblivion*—trust us, that'll help you make up your mind.

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I FEEL PRETTY

Oh, so pretty and witty and...

BRIGHT. I FEEL BRIGHT. KINDA SHINY. BUT CONFUSED AS well. Gender-confused. I am a man trapped in a woman's body—at least on my computer. How the hell did this happen? Once upon a time, I was a superbitch online warrior called Citizen Pain, a *nom de guerre* chosen to honor my love of both morbidly obese boy-genius filmmakers and the dishing out of violent death. Perhaps a little too metaphorically invested in my flak cannon, I saw myself as a monstrous, screaming gibbon, my fur soaked and matted with the blood of my enemies. So cozy and comforting, this merry murder-monkey image let me drift peacefully off to sleep night after night. Sure, sometimes I went online as *Tori Spelling*, but that was just a joke. And there was the whole lap-dancing thing on *Star Wars Galaxies* and all the boyfriends I accrued doing that, but that was a purely scientific sociological study. Really.

So wherefore Tiny Alice? Why is it now that Citizen Pain has all but retired, and every single character I create, be it in online MMOs or single-player games, is Tiny Alice? I've got a Tiny Alice crafting dragon armor in *WOW*, another healing party members in *D&D Online*, one vying for the No. 1 ranking in *Top Spin 2*, a Tiny Alice out-driving Tiger in *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06*, and a Tiny Alice who's a retired physician mother of two living in a committed relationship with an artist in *The Sims 2*. How extreme is it? Not only do I have a male boxer in *Fight Night Round 3* (middleweight champion of the world, thank you) named Tiny Alice, but the first question on my lips during a recent demo of *Ultimate Baseball Online* was "Can you play as a girl?" I was delighted that the answer was "yes." I think Alice is going to make a swell second baseman.

And it's only here, knee-deep in what I openly recognize qualifies officially as a "weird thing," that it actually starts to be a weird thing for me: To me, they're all the same, one brave little Tiny Alice spread across dozens of games, existing and struggling and striving in multiple worlds. They may look a little different (and the Mohawk-wearing, stubble-sporting *Fight Night* thug looks a lot different), but God knows, I do what I can to make them all look the same: pretty, always with green eyes and just a hint of a smile. I love the way I—that is, she—looks. Oh, dear God, please don't tell my wife.

That's the scary part. It's important to me that she's pretty. OK...that I'm pretty. It feels like it's me. So vitally important is Alice's appearance that I have forgone superior armor in *WOW* because I didn't like what it did to my hair. And what do I do with in-game money? I splurge on new outfits and maybe some really cute earrings because, as Oprah has taught me, I deserve it. I've earned a little something nice, something to make me feel special; after all, it's a girl's right, right?

OK, I just looked at that last sentence, and I am mortified. How did I get here? Anyone who's had the misfortune of being in the same ZIP code as me could tell you I have the grooming habits of a wildebeest. My latest clothing purchase was new shoelaces over a year ago. I'm fairly certain I've been wearing this same pair of jeans for about a month now, and I am seriously contemplating cutting my own hair with poultry shears because I like nothing more than seeing my poor, suffering wife gasp in horror. Why does a happily flatulent, unshaven lout like me become a delicate, overachieving flower of femininity every time I boot up a game? Even an online-IQ-test-certified genius such as I cannot figure it out.



>> I SAW MYSELF AS A MONSTROUS, SCREAMING GIBBON, MY FUR SOAKED AND MATTED WITH THE BLOOD OF MY ENEMIES.

But that's the least of it. My son, the same mud-spattered, Mohawked, football-playing boy who has consistently named his game avatars various permutations of "Execution" and "Death," just named his *D&D Online* rogue "Cindy." This weekend, we're planning on looking for some cuter armor to show off our figures. Please, kill me now. Do it for the children. /

SAY GOOD NIGHT, TINY ALICE

After something like three years, countless drifter-dismemberment "jokes," and at least one reference to a piñata stuffed with offal, I and my one-man war against Tyne Daly are retiring from this page. Scorched Earth has been a great ride, but maybe it's time some Johnny Appleseed started nurturing all that blasted landscape. Thanks to CGW and Jeff Green for this great opportunity, and thanks to all you readers who wrote (and even those who didn't). And to all the readers who have used their unholy mental powers to send coded messages to my brain (and that includes you, Natalie), I am now free to come after you. Right when I'm done with Tyne. Be a-scared. Be very a-scared. / Robert Coffey

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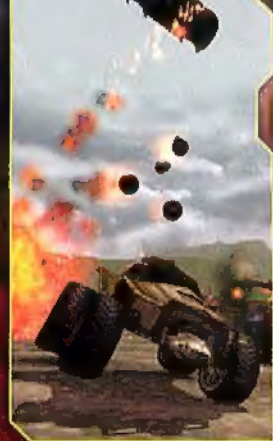
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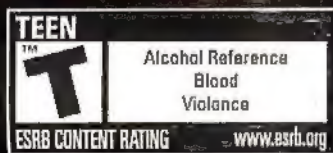
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